September 7, 2025 · Issue No 10,486 · thetimes.com

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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Life without Michael

Dr Clare Bailey Mosley opens up to Decca Aitkenhead

Magazine

Camilla Long

So long, Angela, Middle England's caricature of a working class hero

Page 23

Revealed after 24 years: intelligence failure that forced UK to free 9/11 'plotter'

Amardeep Bassey, Liz Harris and Caroline Wheeler

Scotland Yard was forced to release an alleged Saudi intelligence officer who provided financial backing and support to the 9/11 hijackers, after the FBI failed to share crucial evidence.

The Sunday Times can today reveal that counterterrorism officers who interviewed Omar al-Bayoumi after he was arrested in Birmingham – ten days after two aircraft crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York – were not given a potentially damning document and video linking him to the attacks.

Mark Rossini, a former FBI agent, told The Sunday Times that the release of Bayoumi was "one of the biggest intelligence failures in counterterrorism history".

During a search of Bayoumi's home, paperwork and notebooks including a crude hand-drawn sketch of an aircraft alongside calculations that could be used to work out its descent were found in a garage, along with 80 videos that include Bayoumi meeting two of the hijackers.

Another of the videos confiscated by police operating under an FBI warrant shows Bayoumi filming Capitol Hill in Washington – one of the terrorists' prime targets – during a trip he made with two Saudi diplomats whom the FBI say had a "nexus" with al-Qaeda. But neither the notebook nor the Capitol Hill video were given to British police by the FBI. They also were not told Bayoumi had been investigated by the FBI in the 1990s.

Speaking for the first time, one of the detectives who interrogated Bayoumi says he did "everything he could" to have the Saudi extradited to America – but was turned down by the US authorities. "I still think about it, and I am shocked to this day," he says.

Detective Constable David Campbell, now in his late fifties and retired, says the case "stank to high heaven", adding: "I would have taken Bayoumi to the cleaners on those pieces of evidence."

Campbell said a justice department official told him there was insufficient evidence to justify extradition. "I was gobsmacked … that was a pretty devastating result. Jaw-dropping."

He described Bayoumi during his interrogation as "very, very measured, very calm, very collected, very as if he just knew what to say. I got the impression from his physical demeanour and the way he spoke that he had been trained in counterinterrogation."

Our investigation reviewed thousands of pages of previously sealed documents that have now been made public in court disclosures. The Sunday Times also obtained hours of police interviews with Bayoumi and spoke to former police and FBI officers, figures in the security services and

Continued on page 2→

Ministers target rights reform to head off Farage

PM faces early test over ECHR as new cabinet members push for action to curb migration

Caroline Wheeler and Gabriel Pogrund

Sir Keir Starmer's new cabinet is prepared to overhaul human rights laws to tackle immigration – even if it makes his MPs feel "queasy" – as it seeks to counter Reform UK and win voters' trust.

The prime minister has appointed pragmatists, including Shabana Mahmood as home secretary and David Lammy as justice secretary, after Angela Rayner's resignation on Friday. They are expected to take a tougher line on immigration, putting them on a collision course with Lord Hermer KC, the cautious attorney-general.

A cabinet minister admitted the party would need to "do something that makes us feel queasy" to stop the advance of Nigel Farage, who, if elected prime minister, has vowed to stop migrants arriving on small boats within two weeks of new laws being passed.

Another party insider said "nothing is off the table" for Mahmood. They said she was likely to want to reform the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and would be far more radical than her predecessor. The source added she would "start with the unthinkable and work backwards".

The debate is further complicated by negotiations with Germany on a potential deal to return asylum seekers, similar to the "one in, one out" pact with France. If the government withdraws from its ECHR commitments, such bilateral agreements are said to be in danger.

The debate underlines the stark policy choices facing Starmer after a week that derailed his latest attempt to reboot his government and reconnect with the public. He is also facing a potentially divisive deputy leadership election, after Rayner also quit that party post.

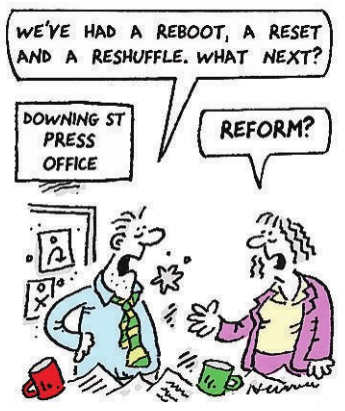
Other developments:

- Sources close to No10 said Mahmood would be a viable and effective candidate for the deputy leadership.
- Darren Jones, the new chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, has leapfrogged Pat McFadden, the work and pensions secretary, as the likeliest person to succeed Rachel Reeves as chancellor.
- Ellie Reeves, the chancellor's sister, has been moved from minister without portfolio to solicitor general, losing her seat at cabinet.
- Starmer announced his intention to confer a peerage on Jason Stockwood, the co-owner of Grimsby Town FC, who was appointed investment minister.
- Rayner remains eligible for a £17,000 severance payout weeks before new rules block compensation for those forced to leave office following a "serious breach" of the ministerial code.
- Kemi Badenoch and businesses called for Rayner's flagship workers' rights package to be shelved, describing the new deal for working people as "a war on the private sector".

Mahmood's first big intervention as home secretary is expected to come within weeks when she announces plans to build modular accommodation for single, adult male asylum seekers on Ministry of Defence land. This will provide more secure accommodation and

Continued on page 2→

NEWMAN'S VIEW


WE'VE HAD A REBOOT, A RESET AND A RESHUFFLE. WHAT NEXT?
DOWNING ST PRESS OFFICE
REFORM?
Newman

EXCLUSIVE HARRY'S PLAN TO CHEER UP KING

MARK CUTHBERT/UK PRESS/GETTY IMAGES

The King, the Queen and Dame Joanna Lumley watch the Highland Games at the Braemar Gathering near Balmoral. Prince Harry visits the UK this week and wants to bring his family back as soon as possible Page 3

PwC: AI and economy to blame for graduate jobs crisis

Louise Eccles and Jill Treanor

One of Britain's biggest graduate employers is hiring 200 fewer university leavers this summer, citing the economic slowdown as "the single biggest factor".

Marco Amitrano, senior partner at PwC UK, said the consultancy giant would have 1,300 recruits over the next 12 months, compared with 1,500 in the same period last year. It has led The Times Top 100 graduate employers' rankings for 17 of the past 27 years.

He singled out artificial intelligence, saying jobs at risk from it were "growing at a slower pace than those with lower exposure". The gap between the two was widening, he said. The fall in PwC's graduate recruitment is equal to an annual drop of 13 per cent.

Other research shows graduates are facing one of the worst job markets in a generation: vacancies are forecast to fall for an "unprecedented" fourth year in a row.

The number of graduates whom companies plan to hire next year will fall to the lowest level since 2012, based on the research by High Fliers, which conducted 15,000 face-to-face interviews with students at 30 universities.

Martin Birchall, managing director of High Fliers Research, said: "This is one of the most difficult periods for young graduates in the last 30 years."

Graduates who have just left university are competing with last

Continued on page 2→

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Palestine protests descend into chaos

Hundreds of Palestine Action supporters tried to prevent arrests at a London demonstration against the group's ban

Dipesh Gadher and Izzy Lyons

Police clashed with Palestine Action supporters at a protest in central London yesterday aimed at overturning the group's proscription as a terrorist organisation.

Officers moved in to make arrests shortly after 1pm as more than 1,000 people in Parliament Square held up handwritten placards stating: "I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action."

The protest, one of the biggest acts of civil disobedience in recent years, started off peacefully.

However, there were ugly scenes just after 3pm when about 200 militant supporters – who were not holding placards – began to physically and verbally abuse officers making arrests.

Members of the group, including a number with masks, pelted police with missiles when they tried to take detainees to a makeshift processing centre behind Westminster Abbey. Others climbed traffic lights, waving Palestinian flags and chanting: "Shame on you" and "Met Police you can't hide, you're supporting genocide."

The Met said on X: "There has been a co-ordinated effort to prevent officers carrying out their duties ... [they] have been subjected to an exceptional level of abuse including punches, kicks, spitting and objects being thrown, in addition to verbal abuse.

"Any assaults against officers will not be tolerated and arrests have already been made. We will identify all those responsible and prosecute to the full extent of the law."

Riot squad officers were brought in to help tackle the violence while a police helicopter circled overhead.

By 9pm, the Met Police had arrested more than 425 people. In some cases, as many as 20 officers were required to detain a single individual. Some of those arrested refused to give their name and details, preventing them from being released on so-called "street bail" and forcing officers instead to take them into custody.

At least two wheelchair users were taken away in a police van.

Among those protesting peacefully were Gillian Kelly, 81, and her husband, Paul Martyn, 69, who had left their home in the Lake District at 6am to travel to London. Kelly, a retired psychotherapist, said it was the first time she had attended a protest in support of Palestine Action. She described its proscription as a case of government "over-reach".

She said she was "not particularly supportive" of the organisation, but wanted to attend on "a point of principle". "This is how an authoritarian regime comes into being," said Kelly. "The government is tone-deaf to the strength of feeling about Gaza."

Another protester was Godfrey King, 86, from Surrey. The former clothing retailer said Israel's actions in Palestine made him "ashamed to call myself a Jew". He said he had attended dozens of pro-Gaza marches and described the ban on Palestine Action as illegal.

More than 1,200 officers were deployed to handle the Parliament Square protest and a separate pro-Gaza march and rally in Whitehall organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. More than 200 of these police had been drafted in from forces outside London.

Speaking on Friday, Ade Adelekan, a deputy assistant commissioner at the Met, warned: "Those participating in this protest and in previous such protests do so knowing that their actions are unlawful. If you show support for Palestine Action – an offence under the Terrorism Act – you will be arrested.

"We have the officer numbers, custody capacity and all other resources to process as many people as required. Attempts to overwhelm policing and the criminal justice system will not be successful."

Saturday's protest, organised by Defend Our Juries, a civil liberties group, is the fifth action in London in support of Palestine Action since it was proscribed by the Home Office on July 5.

> “
> **We will arrest you if you show support for Palestine Action**

TOBY SHEPHEARD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Police tussle with protesters in Parliament Square yesterday. By 9pm more than 425 people had been arrested

Tories plotted Rayner's downfall

Caroline Wheeler
Political Editor

Angela Rayner was the target of an attack campaign orchestrated by the Conservatives codenamed "Operation Stamp Out".

The former deputy prime minister's downfall began with two parliamentary questions drafted by Conservative Campaign Headquarters (CCHQ).

The questions, tabled in January and April, revealed that the prime minister personally paid the full council tax on his flat in 11 Downing Street, but that Rayner was having the bill for her residence covered by the government.

The response led CCHQ to begin digging into where she lived and how she designated her homes for the purposes of claiming expenses, using the same tactics that exposed John Prescott's failure to pay council tax on his grace and favour home when he was deputy PM in 2006.

After it came to light last month that Rayner had bought a property in Hove in May, the Tories stepped up their campaign, with Kevin Hollinrake, the party chairman, fronting the public attacks. The party leader, Kemi Badenoch, was briefed every morning on developments, sources said.

Operation Stamp Out revealed that Rayner was registered on the electoral roll in three places – and that she had given Tameside council and the Cabinet Office different addresses as her primary residence. "Taking a leaf out of the Prescott playbook, the terms 'Three Homes Rayner' and 'Three Votes Rayner' were deployed in attack material," a source said.

Rayner admitted last week that she had underpaid stamp duty by £40,000. She resigned on Friday after being found in breach of the ministerial code because she had failed to seek expert tax advice.

Ministers target rights reform

➔ Continued from page 1

help accelerate the closure of asylum hotels after Starmer said that he wanted to end their use earlier than the planned deadline of 2029.

This will be followed by an asylum white paper this autumn, which will set out proposals to reform the way courts are applying the right to family life – perhaps in the form of guidance to courts, or even legislation. The white paper will also propose measures to reduce the help available to new arrivals.

The plans have been inherited from the former home secretary, Yvette Cooper, who has become foreign secretary.

Rayner's departure poses questions over the future of her controversial workers' rights bill, which is returning to the Commons from the Lords after amendments, with some business leaders hoping it will be watered down further or killed off.

Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium, said: "The hope of many businesses, particularly those in retail employing a lot of people, will be that the changes make it easier for MPs to back the sensible Lords amendments."

Paul Nowak, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress said that "we expect the government to deliver this bill in full".

Jones denied the government was in crisis and insisted Starmer now had the "strongest team" around the cabinet table. He dismissed suggestions that the rejig could delay the prime minister's "phase two" of government with senior figures in unfamiliar briefs.

"The prime minister had been planning a broader reshuffle on a slower timetable, but he brought that forward because that is his decision as prime minister. That's exhibiting leadership and control, not chaos," he told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme.

Starmer now faces the prospect of a party conference overshadowed by manoeuvring for the deputy leadership role vacated by Rayner.

The candidates are thought to include Emily Thornberry, Stella Creasy, Louise Haigh, Meg Hillier and Rosena Allin-Khan.

Politics, pages 4-6
Editorial, page 20

Intelligence failure forced UK to free 9/11 'plotter'

➔ Continued from page 1

politicians involved in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

In one of the interviews with Bayoumi, given in a deposition to lawyers in America, he admits for the first time that the aircraft sketch and the sums were drawn by him, but claims it shows "an equation like any other equation".

For nearly a quarter of a century, Bayoumi's alleged involvement in 9/11 – and that of the Saudi state – has remained obscured behind official denials, classified documents and diplomatic sensitivities. But he is now at the centre of a trillion-dollar lawsuit for compensation for families of 9/11 victims, which alleges that Saudi officials supported the hijackers.

Lawyers for the families have argued that Bayoumi and the Saudi government bear responsibility for providing the hijackers with a support network. They are seeking compensation for more than 10,000 victims. If their case is successful it would be the first time the Saudi state has been held responsible over 9/11.

Saudi Arabia has always denied involvement. It did not respond to requests for comment. Bayoumi says he was pursuing his education in the US and met the 9/11 hijackers by coincidence.

Last week, Judge George Daniels, sitting in the US district court for the southern district of New York, said the families had provided "reasonable evidence" that two Saudi citizens – one of whom was named as Omar al-Bayoumi – were sent by their government to the US to assist the hijackers. He dismissed an application by Saudi Arabia to throw out the lawsuit by claiming sovereign immunity, paving the way for a full public trial.

French-born Zacarias Moussaoui is the only person to be convicted in a US court of involvement in 9/11 and is serving a life sentence. Last year Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and two other men began plea agreements in relation to plotting the attacks.

Full story, pages 8-9

PwC boss warns of graduate jobs crisis

➔ Continued from page 1

year's cohort, who have still not found a job in their preferred career. Many are doing a mix of internships and short-term work, including restaurant work.

He said: "Up to 50 per cent of those who are recruited for graduate programmes are previous years' graduates. So graduates are competing with people who have built up a year or two of work experience or short-term jobs that place them in a better position."

Overall, accounting and professional services companies are among the hardest hit in graduate recruitment. Having recruited almost 6,500 graduates in 2023, there are expected to be fewer than 4,500 graduate vacancies in the sector next year, according to High Fliers.

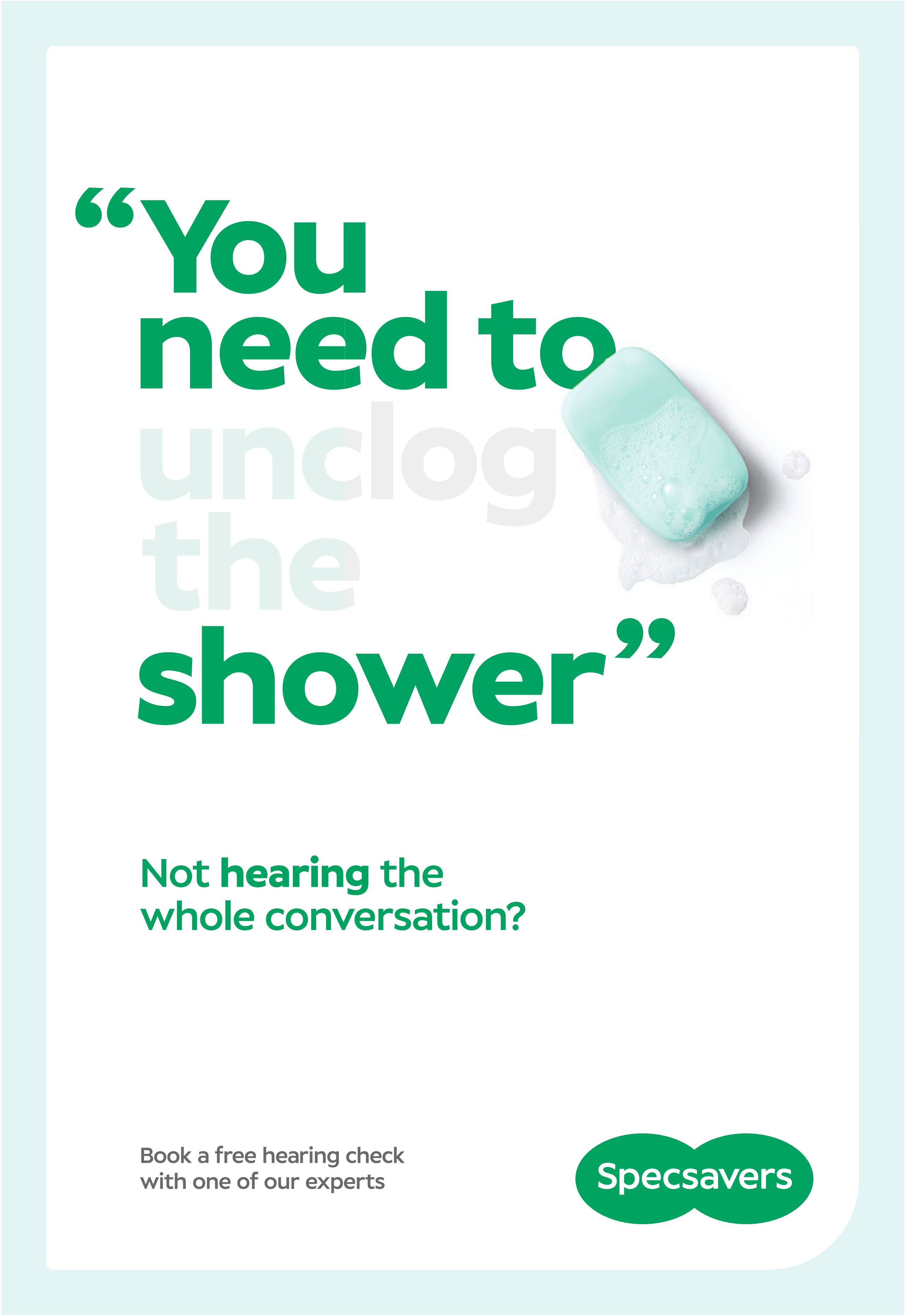
James Reed, chief executive of the Reed recruitment group, said the number of jobs for graduates on its website had fallen to less than a third of what it was in 2021. He said: "Our data shows there is a severe jobs drought with graduates hardest hit, thanks in part to the advance of AI and the tendency to offshore entry-level jobs.

"We may be going into a period of very major disruption in the UK jobs market over the next five years, not dissimilar to what happened in the 1980s for a lot of blue-collar workers, except this time it's white-collar jobs."

Birchall said: "We have seen previous falls in graduate recruitment over one or two-year periods but not four ... This now looks like a sustained downturn as a feel-bad factor seems to be consuming the country."

Carl-Benedikt Frey, a professor of AI and work at the Oxford Internet Institute, said: "The labour market for new graduates has been weakening for some time, partly due to rising economic uncertainty. But we now have compelling evidence that AI has made the situation significantly worse.

"In a world where AI can handle much of the entry-level work, from preparing polished PowerPoint presentations to document review and financial modelling, firms have less incentive to invest in young employees who might later be poached by rivals."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Monarch to be first in 400 years at Catholic funeral after royal death

Lottie Hayton and Roya Nikkhah

The King will next week become the first monarch to attend a Catholic funeral in Britain in an official capacity since the Reformation more than 400 years ago.

Charles, who is head of the Church of England, will attend a Requiem Mass at Westminster Cathedral – the largest Catholic church in England and Wales – for the Duchess of Kent.

Katharine Kent, as she preferred to be known, who died on Thursday aged 92, converted to Catholicism in 1994, after many years of soul-searching, ill health and tragedy. She was the first member of the royal family to do so since King Charles II's deathbed conversion in 1685.

The Queen, the Prince and Princess of Wales alongside most members of the royal family will also attend the service on September 16 at Westminster Cathedral, near Passage, its linked homeless shelter where the duchess used to volunteer.

It is understood the Duke of Sussex, who is currently scheduled to be in the UK from Monday to Thursday this week, will decide in the coming days whether to also attend.

The Duchess's widower, the Duke of Kent, is Queen Elizabeth's cousin and grandson of George V and is now the oldest member of the royal family at 89.

Catherine Pepinster, former editor of the Catholic weekly, The Tablet, and author of *Defenders of the Faith: the British monarchy, religion and the Coronation*, said: "The funeral will be of great historical significance.

"There were signs of rapprochement between the monarchy and the Catholic Church under Elizabeth II – she met many Popes – but was careful not to attend a Catholic Mass in this country.

"The King and the heir to the throne attending Mass in Britain – that is of an entirely different order. This is a huge step forward in ecumenical relations."

While the King has previously attended Mass, he has never done so in Britain. For example, he attended the canonisation in Rome of John Henry Newman in 2019 and the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005. In April, Charles and Camilla also met Pope Francis privately at the Vatican during their Italy state visit, and prayed with him, just days before he died.

Queen Elizabeth II attended the Catholic state funeral of King Baudouin of the Belgians, in St Michael's Cathedral in Brussels, in 1993.

Lord Nicholas Windsor, the duchess's youngest son is a Catholic convert and the Earl of St Andrews, her oldest son is married to Sylvana Tomaselli, a Catholic.

The Duchess of Kent died last week at the age of 92

The British monarchy's complex relationship with Catholicism began with Pope Clement VII's 1527 refusal of Henry VIII's request for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn.

In 1534, Henry formalised England's schism from Rome with the Act of Supremacy. During the reigns of his children Edward VI and Elizabeth I, Protestant zeal grew and Elizabeth became the first Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

Pepinster said: "From the time of Elizabeth I, monarchs have been expected to stand up for the Church of England and reject the Church of Rome."

The Duchess of Kent was received into the Catholic church in January 1994 by Cardinal Basil Hume, then Archbishop of Westminster, after consulting the Queen. The Act of Settlement of 1701 barred royals who became or married Catholics from the line of succession but the Duke of Kent was unaffected by his wife's decision because she was Protestant at the time of their marriage in 1961.

In an interview given [to The Daily Telegraph] in 1997, the duchess described the decision as "fairly impulsive". "I am not going to pretend that it was anything to do with reading the Bible. It had a great deal to do with people I met."

Katharine, who is said to have gained the late Queen's approval, added: "I do love guidelines, and the Catholic Church offers you guidelines. I have always wanted that in my life: I like to know what is expected of me."

Her announcement emphasised that her decision was not connected to controversy about the ordination of women in the Church of England which was raging at the time. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued a joint statement that said it was the decision "of a devout Christian on a spiritual journey".

'Harry's hope is still to bring his family home to Britain'

The duke, who starts a solo trip to the UK this week, wants his children to meet their relatives and see where he grew up

ROYA NIKKHAH

Royal Editor

Since leaving the royal fold for America five years ago, the Duke of Sussex has had his rare visits to the UK dominated by the angst of battles with his family, the media and the government.

This week, Prince Harry is determined to press the reset button to try to change that negative narrative during a four-day visit, his longest trip back to his homeland since Queen Elizabeth's death three years ago.

He will again travel solo, without his young family. After losing his battle with the Home Office over his level of security, he reiterated that he did not believe it was safe for the Duchess of Sussex and their children, Prince Archie, six, and Princess Lilibet, four, to visit.

"I can't see a world in which I would be bringing my wife and children back to the UK at this point. And the things they're going to miss, well, everything … I miss the UK," he told the BBC in May.

Meghan has not visited the UK since September 2022 and Archie and Lili have not been here since June that year, when the Sussexes visited for Elizabeth's platinum jubilee celebrations.

But those close to Harry say he will not give up hope on bringing them here. There is now an acknowledgment by the prince and his camp that pressing the nuclear button of a public battle with His Majesty's government and courts was not the wisest idea, a case that is reported to have cost Harry more than £1 million. He will now pursue a quieter, under-the-radar approach – those close to the prince say the government should expect private "lobbying" from the prince on the matter to continue.

A friend says: "He's not given up hope on bringing his family back to the UK. He wants to be able to show his children where he grew up. He wants them to know their family here. He really would like to come back to the UK much more."

The prince's friends say he is "going to have some fun" this week. Harry's previous default setting of glowering in courtrooms will switch to what he does best: supporting and championing children, young people, the military and rolling his sleeves up with his charities and patronages.

Tomorrow, the third anniversary of his grandmother's death, he will be in London for the WellChild Awards hosted by the charity supporting seriously ill children, of which he is patron. On Tuesday, he will head to Nottingham for an engagement focused on helping young people affected by violence. On Wednesday and Thursday, he will attend private receptions and meetings with most of his other charities and patronages, including the Invictus Foundation, the Diana Award and Scotty's Little Soldiers.

Harry's itinerary, which will be covered by select media considered friendly towards the prince, is said to be "jam-packed with hardly any downtime", which raises the still unanswered question hanging over the visit. Will Harry and the King meet?

Charles, 76, and Harry, 40, have not seen each other since February last year, when the prince flew to London for a 30-minute meeting with his father after he announced his cancer diagnosis. The King, who is at Balmoral and still receiving regular treatment, is known to miss his son.

But a newspaper headline last week declaring "Harry to meet Charles" was wishful thinking. In fact, as of last weekend, no meeting between father and son was scheduled, which may or may not change in the coming days.

Friends of Harry's say the ball is firmly in the royal family's court. "He's made it absolutely clear [in his BBC interview] he wants a reconciliation with his family. It's on them now," says one. But those in royal circles see it differently and wish Harry would stop making such public pleas.

> **No meeting has been fixed for father and son**

His unwise choice of words about Charles's health has not helped Harry's cause. As a friend of the King's tells me: "The water is still pretty chilly on that front." It is understood there is currently "no direct communication at all at the moment" between father and son.

One thing that is certain is there will be no meeting between Harry and the Prince of Wales. The permafrost between the estranged brothers shows no sign of thawing.

There is also an acknowledgment from those close to Harry that several long-running legal battles, which have taken up vast amounts of his time, energy and money, have been "a major distraction". With most of his legal preparation done for his fight against Associated Newspapers, friends say Harry is now "in a really good headspace, looking forwards".

That mindset will come as a relief to many who feel that after laying his soul bare with more than 400 pages of family grievances in his memoir *Spare*, and eternal legal wrangles, he has been battling old demons rather than getting on with his life.

As one of Harry's former advisers said on the eve of his 40th birthday last year: "All he does is spend time looking back. If only he could wrench his neck around and look forwards." Those close to Harry say he is determined to remain "forward-focused" in the coming months.

What does the future look like? Friends say there is a "Sentebale-shaped hole" in his life, referring to the charity he set up in 2006 with Prince Seeiso of Lesotho in memory of their late mothers, to support children affected by HIV and Aids in southern Africa. Since stepping down as Sentebale's patron in March amid a very public and bitter row with the charity's chairwoman, Sophie Chandauka, he has been thinking about how to fill that hole. One close friend who may get a call is Sir Elton John, a firm friend of the Sussexes who has been a vocal supporter of the couple. His Aids foundation has a global reach and could be a good fit for a prince looking for new ways to support children affected by HIV and Aids.

Harry also needs to keep earning. A lot. Multimillion-pound deals for his book and with the streamers Netflix and Spotify are in the rear-view mirror, but there are still hefty security bills to pay and a reported £6 million mortgage on the Sussexes' sprawling home in Montecito, California.

As Harry receives no public funding from the sovereign grant or privately from the royal family, overseas trips, such as this week's visit to the UK, cost him six-figure sums. He pays personally for the travel and accommodation of his entourage.

Harry has rejected offers from the King to stay at Buckingham Palace and the hotel bills mount up. While Meghan, 44, is busy building her As Ever brand selling homeware, rosé wine and raspberry spreads, Harry is thinking about his next "commercial venture". Those close to him say it will not be a sequel to *Spare*, or another tell-all *Harry and Meghan* Netflix documentary. His next project to boost the Sussex coffers will be a "social enterprise with a social conscience".

In July, much was made of a meeting in London captured on camera between Harry and Meghan's American chief communications officer, Meredith Maines, their UK-based director of communications, Liam Maguire, and Tobyn Andreae, the King and Queen's director of communications. Both camps say descriptions of a "peace summit" were overblown.

The meeting was to "open the lines of communication" and avoid a repeat of the Palace being blindsided by surprises like Harry's BBC interview and diary clashes. In May, for example, Harry unexpectedly turned up at a travel conference in Shanghai, while Charles undertook an historic visit to Canada for less than 24 hours to open parliament.

No such attempt has yet been made to open lines of communication with his brother's team and Harry's engagements this week will clash with William and Kate on manoeuvres. A source close to Harry says: "At the end of the day, as he's no longer a member of the institution, he doesn't feel bound to de-conflict his diary with the institution."

A "focal point on Harry's horizon" is July, 2027, the date of the next Invictus Games, the Paralympic-style games for wounded, sick and injured military personnel that he founded 11 years ago. Whether his family join him in Birmingham will depend on how successful his security lobbying proves.

It is Harry's hope that his father, as head of the armed forces, will support the event. Charles's decision will depend on how family matters pan out over the next two years, but scenes of Harry flanked by Charles and William, laughing together at the inaugural games in London in 2014, are unlikely to be replicated.

Back in Montecito, Harry, an increasingly keen surfer, is relishing fatherhood and has started introducing Archie and Lili to the California waves by taking them to "surf camp". As he prepares to return home to a less sunny climate on the family front, a friend says: "He is excited to be on the ground, helping his organisations where he can. He's pumped for the visit, he's happy."

CHRIS ALLERTON/GETTY IMAGES

The Sussexes and their son Archie in 2019 with his grandfather, left, and, above, with his great-grandparents, and Meghan's mother, Doria Ragland

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Writer's bid to save his school theatre

Emily Prescott
Arts and Entertainment Correspondent

One of Britain's finest playwrights has spoken of his sadness that his old school near Nottingham will lose its theatre when it is rebuilt.

James Graham, whose hit plays include *Dear England* and *Ink*, said he would not have become a playwright without the theatre at Ashfield School in Kirkby-in-Ashfield. It is being demolished as part of the Department for Education's school rebuilding programme.

In an interview with next weekend's Sunday Times Magazine, he said: "Eton has three theatres, so why shouldn't my old school have one? It was amazing to have a state school in a working-class community … that had a theatre. What it said culturally and philosophically is that drama is important, that creativity and imagination are important. It told parents it was important. Without it I wouldn't have been a playwright."

Eton puts on around 20 productions a year, from "full-scale musicals and Jacobean classics … to productions of the latest contemporary works directed and produced by the boys themselves", according to the school's website.

Graham, 43, said the theatre was a refuge for him during his schooldays. "I used to struggle with things," he said. "So I got a bit bullied. I was easy to pick on because I was small, shy, skinny."

A petition on Change.org demanding the school reinstate the theatre has had more than 1,600 signatures.

Graham is now preparing for the West End transfer of his play *Punch*. It is based on the memoir of Jacob Dunne, who was jailed for the manslaughter of James Hodgkinson in 2011 and has since campaigned with his victim's mother to raise awareness about the harm a single punch can do.

James Graham's love of theatre has led to an OBE

God of Small Things author was a 'millstone' to her bedevilled mother

Emily Prescott
Arts and Entertainment Correspondent

When Arundhati Roy's "imperious", "soul-crushingly mean" and "cruel" mother died in 2022, the Booker prizewinning author felt she had lost her most enthralling subject.

While she dedicated her bestselling book, *The God of Small Things*, to her mother, she had never written about her – until now.

Last week, Roy published her memoir, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, which reveals in excruciating detail the cruelty, both emotional and physical, of the woman she had to address as "Mrs Roy".

At one point, she recounts her mother telling her the ways in which she had attempted to abort the pregnancy, from "eating lots of green papaya" to using a wire coat hanger. When Roy was six, she recalled how her mother, Mary, mimicked her and told her she would become overweight. When she was nine, her mother called her a "bitch".

In the memoir, Roy depicts her childhood in India with her older brother, Lalith Kumar Christopher Roy, when their mother told her "you're a millstone around my neck". Her father was absent and an alcoholic.

Despite such treatment, Roy said she was "heart-smashed" by her mother's death, and was "puzzled and more than a little ashamed by the intensity of my response" to grieve so deeply for such a complicated mother. She wrote that her brother told her: "She treated nobody as badly as she treated you."

"That first night in a Mrs Roy-less world, I spun unanchored in space with no co-ordinates," she wrote. "I had constructed myself around her. I had grown into the peculiar shape that I am to accommodate her."

When Mary died, Roy did not choose a conventional memorial. Instead, she planted banana trees, ginger, chilli, pepper, ferns and orchids – "a grove instead of a grave". A stone slab read: "BELOVED. Mary Roy, Dreamer Warrior Teacher 07.11.1933 01.09.2022. Founder Pallikoodam." The omission of the word "mother" was intentional. "Motherhood was not … those were not the stripes she fought for," she said. "I wanted to honour her for what she wanted to be honoured about."

Roy, 63, added: "Especially in the West, I think the difficult mother is being made into a whipping post. Whereas I also think it's OK if mothers are difficult. I also saw what was happening to my mother that made her difficult. You've got to go behind the story, look at what she went through. Even as a young child I could see it."

While Mary's role as a mother was complicated, she was admired and exceptional as a political force: a teacher who founded Pallikoodam, a school, and a campaigner who won a Supreme Court case in 1986 securing equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women in India.

Roy, who left home at 16, is keen to avoid any kind of victimhood. "It's not a biography of her or me," she said. "It's just about this relationship between two women who happened to be mother and daughter but were actually two adults."

Nor was the memoir a therapeutic release. "The challenge of the book was not about some cathartic thing, it was 'can I write this?' It was a writing challenge. Can I convey to a reader the fact that you cannot make up your mind about this woman? You cannot have a neat opinion about her."

And yet, Roy still carries around a bookmark with her mother's final words to her: "There is no one in the world whom I have loved more than you."

COURTESY OF ARUNDHATI ROY

Arundhati Roy had to call her mother Mrs Roy

Stamped Out

Angela Rayner's blunder over unpaid stamp duty has crushed what Keir Starmer had hoped would be a fresh start — turning the page on Labour's directionless first year in power. Forced into an emergency reshuffle, the prime minister now has a cabinet tilting firmly to the right. But if this revamp doesn't work, could he be the one getting the boot, asks *Jason Cowley*

ILLUSTRATION: RUSSEL HERNEMAN

Last Sunday, Sir Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves met at 10 Downing Street to finalise plans for their long-anticipated government "reset". All summer they had discussed how Starmer could revive his struggling project, as some aides still describe it.

One key idea was to appoint a chief economic adviser to the PM. Starmer was entering what he calls the defining "second phase" of his premiership, aiming to project optimism and a renewed sense of purpose. He was aware he had lost the trust of many of his MPs following a series of mishandled U-turns, Labour's sharp decline in the polls and his own dismal personal approval ratings.

But within 48 hours, Starmer was facing a crisis over Angela Rayner's tax affairs. After a week of mounting speculation, she released a personal statement on Wednesday admitting that she had underpaid £40,000 in stamp duty on an £800,000 seaside flat she had recently purchased in Hove, East Sussex. She expressed deep regret and referred herself to the prime minister's independent ethics adviser, Sir Laurie Magnus.

Despite claims from her supporters that she was being unfairly targeted by the "right-wing press", it emerged that the deputy prime minister – and housing secretary, no less – had indeed failed to pay the additional stamp duty owed. She attributed the error to incorrect legal advice that, she said, had not "properly taken account" of her circumstances. One of the firms involved denied that, saying it had been "made scapegoats".

Labour's "Red Queen" was in serious trouble. In opposition, she had relished denouncing Tory opponents for alleged financial misconduct. Now she was being accused of hypocrisy. What goes around comes around.

At prime minister's questions on Wednesday Rayner sat next to Starmer, who defended her robustly, citing her "working-class woman" credentials as if it conferred some kind of special status. On his other side was Reeves, the chancellor. Here were the two most powerful women in government and, for different reasons, they both seemed utterly miserable, reflecting the wider mood of unhappiness on the Labour benches.

Rayner was expected by some colleagues to resign on Wednesday. She did not, and Starmer did not want her to. But on Friday, Sir Laurie concluded she had breached the ministerial code because she had ignored advice to apply for expert tax help on her flat purchase. It was over. She resigned as both deputy prime minister and, most significantly, as the elected deputy leader of the party.

An already difficult week for Starmer was getting worse. He had been forced into an emergency cabinet reshuffle and now faced a deputy leadership contest, too – one likely to expose all Labour's internal divisions unless a unity candidate emerges. One possibility is Shabana Mahmood, the newly-promoted home secretary and one of Starmer's most capable senior ministers.

The feeling among backbenchers is just as despondent. "I've never known the mood to be so openly seditious," one influential MP told me, adding: "Keir has no authority in the PLP [parliamentary Labour Party]. But the PLP has never removed a sitting Labour leader. We have this bizarre gap between the analysis of the problem – ultimately it starts at the top – and a willingness to act."

As the party's elected deputy leader, Rayner commanded her own power base, which is why it was politically expedient for Starmer to keep her inside the cabinet. She was popular with members, but also served a strategic purpose: her presence subtly reinforced the message – *if I go, she is next in line.*

Rayner had built support among the trade unions that enabled her rise and has been adept at courting all factions of the parliamentary party, along with wealthy donors. "Unlike Starmer, she knows how to build relationships," one longtime donor told me.

Rayner is out but not finished. Freed from the constraints of collective responsibility, she can now manoeuvre and machinate more freely, which means Starmer will need a "Rayner strategy" to deal with her inevitable interventions.

Labour MPs are openly speculating not only about who the next elected deputy leader will be but who might replace Rayner as leader-in-waiting and, therefore, prime minister, should Starmer go before the end of this parliament. Mahmood, Wes Streeting, the health secretary, and Andy Burnham, mayor of Greater Manchester, are the three leading names.

Since standing down as an MP, Burnham has reinvented himself as the self-styled king of the north. He is liked by the soft left, who want higher taxation and a more left-wing vibe, and has evolved a more direct, populist style – plain speaking, a bit cocky. He is a political version of the fast-talking footballer-turned-entrepreneur Gary Neville; they are friends. He and Starmer have clashed before, although recently they have reached a more pragmatic working relationship.

THE VISION PROBLEM

Starmer is always being asked what his vision is, but, as an unsigned paper on strategy called What Did we Learn on our Summer Holidays?, which has been circulating among MPs and aides, bluntly puts it: "Keir Starmer has no vision and he will never have one. The government has no purpose and the cabinet is not capable of defining it."

Its author told me: "This government is not a tragedy, it's a farce. There's no dignity in the project, no moral stature."

These harsh words reflect the exasperation of those who have been working assiduously behind the scenes to provide the government with an intellectual framework and something approaching a public philosophy. Is Starmer even listening?

Despite being in opposition for

Former minister who lied about phone wants to replace Rayner as deputy leader

Gabriel Pogrund and Caroline Wheeler

A former minister who left the government over a past fraud conviction intends to stand as deputy leader of the Labour Party following Angela Rayner's resignation.

Louise Haigh, the former transport secretary, has told friends she plans to run. She resigned from her cabinet post in November last year after it emerged that she had pleaded guilty to falsely telling police in 2013 that her work phone had been stolen.

Standing in the election to be deputy leader would prompt questions about her past and it would be awkward for No 10 if Haigh won as she played a leading role in the rebellion against welfare reforms, which were shelved in June.

The contest is likely to become a referendum on the government's performance since Labour won the general election in July last year and a signal of where the membership want the party to go.

Haigh is seen as popular among the soft left of the parliamentary party. The term is used to refer to MPs who are opposed to both hard-left and Blairite politics.

Although Rayner held both, the deputy leadership role is distinct from that of deputy prime minister. David Lammy was given that role when he was moved from foreign secretary to justice secretary in last week's reshuffle.

The deputy leadership, which is constitutionally mandated by Labour's rulebook, carries no powers in government but provides a public platform and a seat on the party's ruling national executive committee (NEC).

Under rules that were revised by Sir Keir Starmer to lock out left-wing challengers, candidates must obtain nominations from 20 per cent of the House of Commons section of the parliamentary party – 80 MPs – to stand. They must also receive the backing of either 5 per cent of local Labour parties or three affiliates, two of which must be trade unions. Eligible candidates then proceed to a vote of party members.

On Monday, the NEC will meet to discuss the timetable for the contest. One person close to the leadership said Starmer's allies had ruled out reviving Jeremy Corbyn's proposal to abolish the position . Corbyn supporters tabled the idea when he was Labour leader in an attempt to neuter Tom Watson, his elected deputy, in 2019, but were outmanoeuvred.

Although removing the role might have appealed to No 10, doing so would require constitutional changes at the party conference. Trade unions would need to support such a move, which would be unlikely as it would reduce their collective influence.

The Labour MPs Rosena Allin-Khan and Louise Haigh are said to be considering runs for the deputy leadership

> **It's crucial that this is not a leadership stitch-up**

No 10 has declined to name a preferred candidate for the deputy leadership. Some of Starmer's supporters would like Shabana Mahmood, the newly appointed home secretary, to run.

Others believe it would be simplest to ask Lammy to stand, allowing the deputy prime minister and leadership roles to be held by one person.

Dame Emily Thornberry, who since being excluded from government by Starmer has chaired the foreign affairs select committee, and Dame Meg Hillier, who chairs the Treasury select committee, are both being spoken about as potentially strong candidates. Stella Creasy, the Walthamstow MP who is a moderate but not a loyalist, is another name in circulation.

It is unclear if an out and out critic of the leadership would pass the threshold needed to stand. Rosena Allin-Khan, the Tooting MP who came second in the deputy leadership contest in 2020, is rumoured to be considering a run. She was removed as a trade envoy after rebelling on the welfare bill.

Richard Burgon, who is seen as the torchbearer of Bennite politics – after Tony Benn, who unsuccessfully challenged the incumbent deputy Denis Healey in 1981 and mentored Corbyn – did not reply when asked if he would stand. However, he posted on X on Saturday: "It's crucial that this is a fully democratic process – not a leadership stitch-up."

According to figures drawn from its annual accounts, Labour's membership has fallen by 200,000 in five years but it remains the largest UK political party with 333,235 members.

In March, polling conducted by Survation in partnership with Labour List found that Ed Miliband, the energy secretary and former leader, had the highest net favourability in the cabinet among Labour members, at +69. Rayner was second (+63) followed by Lisa Nandy (+39), Hillary Benn (+37) and John Healey (+36). Starmer recorded net approval of just 14, narrowly ahead of Wes Streeting (10). Rachel Reeves was on -11.

Andy Burnham, right, has adopted his friend Gary Neville's plain-speaking style and is liked by the soft left

> I've never known the mood to be so openly seditious. Keir has no authority

14 years, Labour came to power spectacularly ill-prepared. The hard work of stress-testing policy, of developing a theory of government, had not been done. Sue Gray, Starmer's first pick as chief of staff, is blamed for the mess; the reality is that it was a collective failure a decade in the making.

What is Labour's equivalent of Stepping Stones, the wide-ranging 1977 policy report co-written by John Hoskyns, the businessman who later became head of Margaret Thatcher's policy unit?

Stepping Stones provided an overarching analysis of British economic decline, an intellectual framework for radical reform and for what would become Thatcherism – the weakening of trade union power, deregulation, privatisation, tax cuts and tight monetary policy to combat inflation. Hoskyns and other free-market ideologues told Thatcher that if she was to transform Britain, she would have to break taboos and think the unthinkable.

When you speak to Starmer's aides and the heads of left-leaning think tanks, they use similar language about structural decline and the failure of state capacity. But when you ask what the PM is prepared to do about it, they don't know – and they're meant to be providing the ideas and intellectual ballast.

The appointments made as part of the internal reshuffle of No 10 on Monday confused many. Tim Allan, the veteran Blairite and PR magnate, came in as head of communications (the third in less than 12 months); Minouche Shafik, a seasoned academic and bureaucrat (but with no experience of running a business or creating wealth), was appointed chief economic adviser; and Darren Jones became chief secretary to the prime minister.

Jones previously served as chief secretary to the Treasury and led the interdepartmental negotiations on the spending review. He carries himself with the confidence of a newly appointed head boy, high on the thin air of his own self-importance.

He is, however, capable with spreadsheets, and has been tasked with improving delivery across departments. In Friday's second reshuffle he was garlanded with another additional title, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

I was told the internal No 10 reset was more about "competence and delivery" than political strategy. But this seems like the wrong way round: in government you first need a political programme, then you find the people to implement it.

'DO SOMETHING QUEASY'

One senior cabinet minister says the party will need "to do something queasy" on immigration to win the trust of voters. But why restrict this to immigration? What about welfare and the sclerotic administrative state?

Labour politicians are too complacent in their belief systems. It's time they started thinking against themselves in the way that progressives, both left and right, have done in Sweden and Denmark in response to mass public disaffection about open borders and societal fragmentation.

And what of the Reeves-Starmer relationship at the end of this traumatic week for Labour? There's no doubt that they, plus Morgan McSweeney, the prime minister's chief of staff – strengthened by the reshuffle thanks to the empowerment of allies such as Mahmood (from the Blue Labour right) and Pat McFadden (from the Blairite right) – remain the three most significant figures in the government.

Reeves backed the appointment of Shafik (although she was ultimately Starmer's choice) and championed the promotion of Jones. Her aides are adamant that there is no rift between the chancellor and the prime minister. They welcome more creative tension and more heterodox thinking on economic policy but don't want outright conflict, as there was during the New Labour years, when Gordon Brown exerted a mesmeric hold over the Treasury and even Tony Blair submitted to his will.

They believe that, paradoxically, rising long-term borrowing costs will strengthen the chancellor's argument about the need for fiscal discipline and greater control over public spending. And she will resist the pressure from MPs to lift the two-child benefit cap, a totemic campaign for the soft left.

But together Starmer and Reeves are bound on a wheel of fire: they accept that the budget on November 26, in which taxes will rise again, will in large part determine their fate.

THE LOOMING SHADOW

This has been a terrible week for Starmer after a dismal first year in office. It has exposed the core weaknesses of his leadership: a lack of political instinct and any coherent political philosophy, a reactive rather than proactive approach (note the asylum crisis), and a tendency to manage the status quo rather than lead and pursue serious reform.

Perhaps Rayner's fall – and the sweeping reshuffle it provoked – will, in retrospect, mark the moment Starmer finally changed direction and grasped the full scale of the problems facing the country in this new political era. Or perhaps not.

If the prime minister fails to set a clear direction for his government in his conference speech, and demonstrate it by clearly defined intentions and actions, Labour will be routed in next year's Scottish, Welsh and English local elections.

Looming over this faltering government is the shadow of Nigel Farage's Reform. Labour do not consider the Conservatives to be a serious electoral threat – "They scarcely have a pulse now," one senior aide said – but Reform are viewed differently. "Reform can't govern without the north," one red-wall MP said. "Who can keep it? It takes us to difficult decisions about the leadership."

Call it sedition, or simply an expression of realism about the state of Starmer's premiership – and how and why an increasing number of his own MPs believe it might end.

Editorial, page 20
Camilla Long, page 23

PM's one-woman army faces fight of her life . . . to secure his second term

Gabriel Pogrund
Whitehall Editor

In May 2021, Keir Starmer turned to Shabana Mahmood to save his leadership.

Labour's defeat in the Hartlepool by-election, though so embarrassing for Starmer that he considered quitting, was only a prelude to a more ominous event.

Within weeks, he faced another by-election in Batley & Spen in West Yorkshire. The party's old nemesis, George Galloway, was exploiting unhappiness over Israel among Muslim voters. Traditional white voters were leaning Tory. Had he lost, Starmer would have faced a leadership challenge.

He appointed Mahmood, then a little-known Birmingham Ladywood MP, to run his campaign, asking her to do anything – everything – to win. She quickly got to work, demanding colleagues join a daily 6am call, sacking those she deemed foolish or lazy and circulating inflammatory leaflets accusing the Tories of supporting the government of India.

The party's candidate, Kim Leadbeater, scraped through by 323 votes. It was the slenderest margin by which Labour had held onto an English seat in by-election history, but also the pivot point that set Starmer on his course to No 10.

Today, having been the biggest beneficiary of last week's reshuffle, Mahmood is home secretary.

Starmer is again facing questions about his future amid subterranean polling ratings and a threat from the populist right and the hard left. He has again turned to Mahmood, a no-nonsense political pugilist, to bail him out by taking Labour to places it would not conventionally go.

Her challenge is far greater than a single electoral contest. She must stop the boats, close migrant hotels and cut crime on a timetable that gives Labour a chance of forestalling Nigel Farage.

That is more or less what Starmer told Mahmood, then the justice secretary, when she was summoned from her constituency on Friday.

Mahmood, 44, needed no invitation to think along the radical lines he set out. She has told friends it is a "dream job" and "nothing is off the table" in her mission to restore law and order. If circumstances require, she is prepared to upend the status quo on everything from European human rights law to the sanctions imposed on petty criminals. "She will start with the unthinkable and work backwards," a friend says.

Her ascension to one of the great offices of state is a remarkable moment for a woman whose politics might sound like a contradiction. The daughter of parents with Pakistani roots who, at one point, owned a corner shop, she is a devout Muslim who spent part of her youth in Taif, a city in Saudi Arabia where her father worked as an engineer.

Having failed the 11-plus, she attended a comprehensive, then a grammar school, before reading law at Oxford. She was president of her college's junior common room. Rishi Sunak was one of the students she persuaded to vote for her.

In 2010, after being called to the bar and practising professional indemnity law, she was selected as Labour's candidate in a safe Birmingham seat. Her majority, which was 10,105 that year and exceeded 28,000 by 2019, has fallen below 3,500. Despite the challenge she faced last year from Akhmed Yakoob, a pro-Gaza independent, and the fact that hers is the third-biggest Muslim constituency in Britain, self-interest has not served to soften her politics. During the Corbyn years, her opposition to the left was unflinching. Upon being offered a job in his shadow cabinet, she told him: "I'll be miserable, and I'll make you miserable as well." She declined and quietly made good on the latter part.

Unlike many of her parliamentary colleagues, she did not consider leaving the party, nor shy away from the political combat many of them felt the moment demanded, but were not prepared to stomach.

As a member of Labour's ruling national executive committee, she instead spent time out of the spotlight resisting the left's attempts to dominate the party's structures.

She was encouraged by Tom Watson, a fellow Black Country MP who, by dint of knowing her father, a local Labour councillor, assumed the affectionate status of "uncle". She also told friends that her Muslim name gave her a degree of camouflage.

She defied easy categorisation. Having been upbraided earlier in her parliamentary career for taking part in a demonstration outside a Sainsbury's against the stocking of goods manufactured in the occupied West Bank, she became a thorn in the side of leadership on antisemitism in particular. Mike Katz of the Jewish Labour Movement later said she "understands antisemitism and has taken action against it".

After Corbyn's departure, Mahmood became the torchbearer of the old Labour right, which seeks to appeal to the social conservatism and community-mindedness of the party's traditional white working class. Around the shadow cabinet table, she was seen as one of the people to truly "get" the gulf between Labour and much of the public, especially when it came to its perceived stance on migration and crime. She and Morgan McSweeney, Starmer's chief aide, were kindred spirits.

To those who know her, there is no intellectual tension in her political identity.

> She publicly floated the idea of castrating paedophiles

Shabana Mahmood ordered prisoners' early release

Lord Glasman, the founder of Blue Labour, which seeks to promote "faith" and "family" within the party, says it is because of her background – her deep belief in God, her years manning the till at her father's newsagents – that have rooted her in the traditional values that her colleagues have often struggled to understand.

"Idiots would say she's socially conservative," he said. "I would say she's just a completely normal human being, which is remarkable within Labour. She's just a normal person who hates mugging, bullying, phone theft. She really thinks it's disgusting. She's also been unremitting in facing down Islamism, in her constituency, in her work. She believes it's her moral duty to serve this country. That's [the consequence of] her faith."

Another friend noted that Mahmood, whose father used to keep a cricket bat behind the till to pre-empt shoplifting, needed no introduction to the impact of crime on ordinary people.

The past year and a half have offered a glimpse of the sort of home secretary she is likely to be. As justice secretary, she oversaw the early release of thousands of offenders from overcrowded prisons which she knew to be politically difficult but deemed necessary.

She demanded money from the exchequer to build prisons, introduced a trial of tasers in prisons to counter "unacceptably high levels of crime", and launched a review into the facilities used to house Islamist extremists. She publicly floated the idea of castrating sex offenders.

Such pronouncements are only one half of why Starmer rewarded her with her new brief. The prime minister, who prizes quiet competence above all, also believes she mastered the nitty gritty of running a department.

Watson, now a Labour peer, said: "She is consistent and relentless in her brief. She turns up early to work early every day, never fails to read a brief or finish a box and never puts off a problem. For her, parliamentary recesses and weekends are the opportunity for more work.

"She has the rare ability to see the big picture on policy while able to focus on its delivery in detail."

Glasman echoed: "She's got really good administrative ability. She's head and shoulders above. As a minister, she got a grip of justice. And she actually, you know, talked to the civil servants, and there was a reorientation as a result."

Despite her elevation, Mahmood is not seen as a loyalist – she is not a personal friend of Starmer and did not back him when he ran for the role in 2020. (She backed no one publicly.) She has also been prepared to criticise him behind closed doors. During the early days of the Gaza war, she was deeply hurt by a perceived lack of support for her and colleagues facing abuse in their constituencies.

In cabinet, Mahmood has been more candid than most, using a gathering at Chequers after the government's retreat on welfare to say that many working people would not recognise themselves or their values in Labour.

She was among a handful of ministers who believed from the outset that the prime minister should have launched a full inquiry into the grooming gangs scandal. She is deeply admiring of him for dragging the party back to the centre, but is alive to his political limitations.

By putting her into the Home Office, Starmer has given her the freedom to explore radical solutions to the migration issue. If that puts her on a collision course with Lord Hermer, the attorney-general, on the question of the European Convention of Human Rights, another issue may be Starmer himself. Last week, the prime minister said he would not withdraw from the treaty.

Lord Gove, the former Conservative minister and now editor of The Spectator, said on BBC Radio 4's *PM* programme last night: "Shabana combines both a lifetime of experience as a Labour organiser and campaigner, so she's got grassroots grit, with a very fine mind and I think she's been consistently underestimated in politics.

"But she now faces the biggest challenge that any Labour politician could have, which is to develop a policy on migration to beat back the threat from Reform." The question is whether Starmer has the stomach to back her.

'He's far, far better than Rachel': why Starmer pinched his Mini Keir from No 11

Charlotte Ivers and Caroline Wheeler

Darren Jones is a vegan (on environmental grounds), a jazz enthusiast (and saxophonist) and, in the words of one of his friends, a geek who has "leant into being a geek instead of trying to prove he isn't one". As of last week, at the age of 38, he is also one of the most powerful men in the country.

Last Monday, besieged on all sides, Sir Keir Starmer announced "phase two" of his government. A key player in this was to be Jones, the new chief secretary to the prime minister.

It is a role that did not exist before, and its aim is to fix Starmer's biggest challenge: the difficulty of getting anything done.

The Whitehall machine, officials in successive administrations complain, only kicks into action to implement a particular policy when the eyes of the prime minister are focused on it. With only one prime minister, this is a big problem for a government with a lot to do and a short time to do it.

The idea is that Jones will become a "mini Keir", a second voice who can speak with the prime minister's authority and force through the government's priorities: on the cost of living, on the NHS, on border security.

In the reshuffle that followed Angela Rayner's resignation on Thursday, Jones was also put in charge of the Cabinet Office, the government department responsible for co-ordinating policy across Whitehall.

He was sent out on the morning broadcast round yesterday, trusted as a safe pair of hands to represent the government's position after a challenging week. He told Sky News that the reshuffle was about "putting the ministers [Starmer] wanted in the places to really drive on delivering reform in line with the public's priorities".

He told the BBC's *Today* programme that the reshuffle was indicative of "leadership and control, not chaos" and that Starmer's "commitment to the ministerial code has been proved by his actions" when it came to Rayner's resignation.

Jones was the obvious choice for a role that requires being the second half of the prime minister's brain. "Starmer, but younger and taller" is how one Westminster insider describes him. Like Starmer, he is not particularly ideological: the type of Labour MP who talks about focusing on "what works".

As is the case for several younger members of the new intake, Jones is a child of the Blair era. Born in 1986, his mother a hospital administrator and his father a security guard, he grew up with little on the Lawrence Weston estate in Bristol. Blair's introduction of the national minimum wage was "such a big change for [my family]" he told a Labour Together event last year.

After school, he studied human bioscience at the University of Plymouth and planned to become a GP. Instead, he became a lawyer so he could have more time to focus on politics. At first, this did not go well. In 2015, he lost to the Conservatives in the marginal seat of Bristol North West. Undeterred, he campaigned to remain in the EU, and then went to work for the Hillary Clinton campaign in Miami.

Things began to look up in 2017. Jones this time won the seat. Arriving in parliament, his ambition soon became clear to his new colleagues. His detractors named him "Yosser", after Yosser Hughes from *Boys from the Blackstuff*. Catchphrase: "gizza job".

"He's very guarded, he's not a socialiser. I think he can find the tea room stuff difficult at times as he can be a bit socially awkward," adds another, who nonetheless finds Jones "likeable". Given he has three children – aged seven, six and two – with his wife Lucy, a management consultant, he is not a man who has much time for socialising in Westminster.

Darren Jones, with his wife Lucy. The new chief secretary to the PM has a reputation for knowing what he is talking about, an asset when dealing with Whitehall

In 2023, Jones became Starmer's shadow chief secretary to the Treasury. Bim Afolami, then his opposite number as a Conservative Treasury minister, is scathing about Labour colleagues who condemned Jones's ambition. "People often prefer smiley mediocrity to actual ability," he says. "He's not arrogant, he's a guy who knows what he's talking about."

Jones, Afolami says, "was the best performer in the Commons on their side in the Treasury – far, far better than Rachel". It was those skills that first put him on the radar for promotion.

Before entering the shadow cabinet, as chair of the business and trade select committee, his interrogation of under-fire bosses and ministers drew attention. In one memorable moment, as a beleaguered Boris Johnson faced parliament's liaison committee on his penultimate day in power, Jones leant forward to tell the prime minister: "There's a delegation of your cabinet colleagues waiting in Downing Street … waiting to tell you when you finish here today that it's time for you to go." Johnson burbled semi-coherently. "This conversation will happen in a few minutes, prime minister," Jones deadpanned.

> He's like Keir, but younger and taller

One longstanding aide says: "The reason he is a good communicator is that, rather than regurgitate No 10 lines, he says what he thinks. One feels that he is saying what he feels, which comes across really well."

Until last week, Jones's job – as chief secretary to the Treasury – had been to enforce spending discipline. Two of Starmer's highest-profile upsets – the U-turn on means-testing winter fuel payments, and the defeat over disability benefits reform – have come from a failure to do this.

Having hard conversations with government departments will continue to be Jones's bread and butter. Whether he succeeds may yet determine the outcome of the Starmer administration.

The Whitehall source added: "Of all the changes made in the past 24 hours, this has strengthened the idea that Darren Jones is the one waiting in the wings to replace Reeves if she comes unstuck in the autumn. His role allows him to range across Whitehall. It's hard to believe that has not been done consciously given the perils that lie ahead for the chancellor." Another government source said they now believed Jones was the favourite to succeed Reeves.

It is understood that many within government fear Reeves could struggle this autumn if she breaks any of her pledges to the public by introducing manifesto-commitment breaking tax rises, or being forced to break her own fiscal rules. There are also concerns of a post-budget gilt market meltdown if she does not do enough to reassure them.

Jones knows that all political careers end. He seems acutely aware that, one day, he too may find himself sitting across from a smart young whippersnapper who tells him his time is up.

The question is, how much can he achieve before then? The success of this government will depend on the answer.

Economic gurus in Downing Street, Business

RFK adviser at Reform conference links Charles and Kate cancers to Covid jabs

Harry Yorke and Shaun Lintern

A British doctor used the main stage at Reform UK's annual conference yesterday to suggest there may be a link between Covid-19 vaccines and members of the royal family getting cancer.

Dr Aseem Malhotra quoted a claim that the vaccination was a "significant factor" in the diagnoses of King Charles and the Princess of Wales.

Wes Streeting, the health secretary, said his words were dangerous and risked fuelling a drop in vaccine uptake.

Later, Lucy Connolly, the former childminder jailed after pleading guilty to inciting racial hatred, received a standing ovation as she was introduced at the conference as Britain's "favourite political prisoner".

The King was diagnosed with an undisclosed form of cancer in February 2024, and the Princess of Wales announced in March 2024 that she was undergoing preventative chemotherapy after cancer was detected. In January this year, Kate announced that she was in remission.

Malhotra, who is an adviser to the US health secretary, Robert F Kennedy Jr, was speaking on the main stage at Reform's conference in Birmingham. Dr David Bull, the party's chairman, described him as a "brilliant clinician" and "vociferous public health campaigner".

In a speech focusing heavily on alleged harms from vaccines, Malhotra said he had been asked to share findings from "one of Britain's most eminent oncologists, Professor Angus Dalgleish" that "he thinks it's highly likely that the Covid vaccines have been a factor, a significant factor, in the cancer of members of the royal family".

Dalgleish is a professor of oncology at St George's, University of London, and previously stood as a parliamentary candidate for Ukip in 2015. He was contacted for comment.

Malhotra sought to clarify his comments on X that Dalgleish's opinion was supported by a statement from Steven Hatfill, an adviser to President Trump's administration on pandemic preparedness.

Malhotra's claims are not supported by mainstream clinicians or experts. Cancer Research has previously said there is no evidence to suggest that any of the Covid-19 vaccines cause cancer.

The doctor has been repeatedly criticised by other medics for making unproven claims. There have been calls for the General Medical Council to investigate him but it has not taken action.

Malhotra told the conference crowd that modern medicine had been "hijacked by powerful commercial interests" which he said were to blame for the UK's healthcare crisis.

Claiming to be in "constant communication" with Kennedy, he accused pharmaceutical companies of "criminal behaviour" in hiding harms and promoting harmful medicines.

According to the UK Health Security Agency, Covid vaccines have saved 475,000 lives in the UK, with more people avoiding hospital or being put on a ventilator in intensive care.

Streeting said: "When we are seeing falling numbers of parents getting their children vaccinated, and a resurgence of disease we had previously eradicated, it is shockingly irresponsible for Nigel Farage to give a platform to these poisonous lies. Farage should apologise and sever all ties with this dangerous extremism."

A Reform UK spokesman said Malhotra was a "guest speaker with his own opinions", adding that the party "does not endorse what he said but does believe in free speech".

After Malhotra, Connolly arrived on stage for an interview with The Telegraph's *Planet Normal* podcast, during which she said she would like to work with Reform to overhaul the criminal justice system. She also argued that prison building should be halted and the majority of female inmates released.

Earlier, Farage signalled Reform would seek to significantly curb migrants' access to benefits and said only British citizens would benefit from his plans to lift the two-child cap.

In an interview with Sky News, he said only "British working people" would be eligible for additional payments from the lifting of the cap, which prevents parents from claiming child tax credit or universal credit for more than two children.

It is understood he has told allies he wants to restrict the more generous payments to British citizens as a way of reducing the policy's £2.5 billion-a-year price tag.

He also suggested people claiming out-of-work benefits would not qualify, with the policy reserved for couples working full-time for 37.5 hours a week.

He told Reform members on Friday he would soon "outline some serious cuts" to the welfare budget.

While the package of benefits cuts is not yet decided, senior party insiders have revealed they are considering a series of reforms largely focused on tightening eligibility criteria and imposing a more rigorous testing regime.

Farage and Richard Tice, his deputy leader, are particularly keen to reduce migrants' ability to access benefits.

Asylum seekers are already largely excluded from the benefits system, receiving a small weekly allowance, while many overseas workers have no recourse to public funds as part of their visa conditions.

However, foreign nationals become eligible for universal credit and other benefits on the same terms as British citizens once they are granted indefinite leave to remain or refugee status. As of June this year, almost 1.3 million foreign nationals claimed UC.

Farage also confirmed he would deport female asylum seekers back to the Taliban in Afghanistan if he wins the next general election.

Asked by Sky News if he would detain women and children and "send them back" he responded: "Yes."

Tice and Zia Yusuf, the party's head of policy, are also understood to be examining proposals to cut taxpayer funding to Motability Operations, a company that provides cars to disabled people in exchange for a portion of their benefits, while also restricting the types of vehicle available. Farage and Yusuf are also considering options to address what they consider an "overdiagnosis" of mental health conditions such as ADHD, mild anxiety and depression.

Josh Glancy

Vibes of fury and joy, that's what powers the Farage Show. And booze, of course

On the one hand, Reform's first full-fat party conference was an orgy of hubris. More presumptuous than a Hillary Clinton victory party. A platform for cranks (conspiracy theorist Dr Aseem Malhotra) and criminals (burn-the-migrant-hotels tweeter Lucy Connolly). A display of mad impudence from a party that can't field a five-a-side team of MPs, yet announced a "Department for Preparing for Government". Which, as Nigel Farage explained, will ensure that "when we win we can hit the ground running". *When* we win.

Inevitability was the order of the day in Birmingham. We're not due an election for almost four years and Labour has a 148-seat majority. Nonetheless, Farage is not just measuring the drapes in No 10 but having conversations with advisers about that terrifying moment when a new prime minister receives the nuclear codes. Cocksure is putting it mildly.

On the other hand, here we go, here we go, here we go – to borrow from chief whip Lee Anderson's entrance ditty. Reform has been well ahead in the polls for more than five months now, currently at 35 per cent to Labour's 20 per cent. It has built a membership of 240,000 from scratch. It has huge momentum.

As I watched the festivities in Birmingham, my phone kept lighting up with news of Angela Rayner's downfall and the chaotic reshuffling of Sir Keir Starmer's government, which is beginning to take on a vaguely terminal air. Perhaps this country really is such a mess that we're ready to throw in our lot with Farage and his last chance to save Britain. "He's going to be the next PM, I can't see what will stop us," as one Reform official put it.

This year's conference was all about "professionalism". There were still hints of the rackety Kipperfests of yore, but along with the Starmer Halloween masks and Nigel tattoos came policy debates, business lounges and public affairs chaps in M&S suits.

Even Mansoor Abulhoul, the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to London, turned up to cast his diplomatic eye over proceedings.

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JACK HILL

ANDERSON
29
POCHIN
29
FARAGE
10
TICE
29
ANNE JONES
29

Reform's MPs — Lee Anderson, Sarah Pochin, Nigel Farage and Richard Tice — are not enough for a five-a-side team. Guests included Lucy Connolly, below

When Farage introduced the hall to Nadine Dorries, the former Tory culture secretary and latest Reform trophy defector, she delivered a long and lifeless analysis of Britain's perilous fiscal situation. It was an attempt to show that Reform is *serious*.

"Apologies, I didn't exactly pump up the audience," Dorries mumbled upon leaving the stage.

Yet the essential ingredient of Reform is not granular economic analysis but vibes. It is vibes that brought together plumbers from Chelmsford and beauticians from Knutsford. That lured rakish aristocrats up from Wiltshire and retired grannies down from Cumbria. That have brought tweedy young René Girard fans with wispy moustaches into the same movement as Mancunian estate agents and Yorkshire pub landladies.

Vibes of fury and joy, powerfully combined. Anger at Britain's porous borders; joy that they can vent about it together. Frustration with economic decline, but also delight that Reform's grave message comes wrapped in booze-cruise exuberance and panto melodrama. Mass deportation, but with jazz hands.

"I'm doing this for my great-grandkids, I want them to grow up in a better country," Pamela Taylor, 79, told me as she waited for Farage to come and sign football shirts. Taylor lives in the Brecon Beacons and struggles with how much her high street has changed. "You walk down it and wonder who are illegals," she said. "I never thought I'd look at people like that. People coming to this country now don't like us, they don't like our culture."

Suzy Lewis, a teal-jumpsuited Tory-switcher I met at a drinks party, put it even more starkly: "I joined Reform because I wanted to be able to breathe again, to live again. Labour and the Tories' air is foetid and stale. This air has oxygen. I feel like I can breathe."

Alcohol is Reform's diesel. At Friday night's "after-party" the crowd at the bar was five deep. Tempers frayed at delays in service. Puce-faced men shouted at stretched bar staff. Security was called and expulsions were threatened until Paul Nuttall, the Reform deputy chairman, intervened to calm the situation.

Elsewhere, barrel-chested men opined loudly on the International Monetary Fund and the Debt Management Office. "The Labour government has already entered its *Totentanz*," one young ideologue told me, a reference to Franz Liszt's famous "death dance" composition. When I left at 1am, men were still discoursing excitedly on the failures of the administrative state. It's hard to match that kind of energy.

There was the odd turban in Birmingham, but this was a notably white crowd. Oni Oviri, 43, a supply chain consultant from London, noted very few fellow members of the "melanin community" in the hall. Several people had already mistaken her for Kemi Badenoch, whom she does not resemble. "I had two people come up to me as soon as I arrived, saying, 'Oh, we knew this would be the big announcement, that Kemi's going to join the Reform Party,'" said Oviri. "I haven't even got the same hair as her!"

Oviri is a "Reform-curious" Tory but thinks Farage's party currently lacks the structure and funding to deliver on his grand promises. It's still too much the Nigel show. "I think a lot of people feel like we're out at sea," she said. "So we see one piece of driftwood and we clutch at it. That's what is happening."

Conscious of accusations that he's a one-man band, Farage used his speech to point out that the Reform football shirt shop at the conference has a full first XI of names: Yusuf, Tice, Pochin and so on. He's right that there are many shirts on display, but there is only one on sale: Farage 10. At £40 a pop, £100 if you want it signed by the big man, all proceeds to the Reform Party. They have "sold like hot cakes", a shop assistant told me.

Unlike his friend Donald Trump, Farage doesn't plan his own cryptocurrency, but his merch game is beginning to rival the president's. Farage fluctuates in just how close he hugs Trump, who is unpopular in this country even among Reform voters, but after visiting the White House at the beginning of last week he is in full Maga mode. "Donald is wise," he told the audience, borrowing the great man's words to demand that we "drill, baby, drill" in the North Sea.

America is madder than Britain and Trump is madder than Farage, but the parallels are everywhere. Both exude an unapologetic naffness and vaudevillian air, with Trump drawing from the high camp of Broadway and Farage from the bawdy traditions of the music hall. Both bind their movements together with personal charisma and raucous patriotism.

Farage's position at present is analogous to Trump in early 2016, earning acres of media coverage every time he opens his mouth. The difference is expectation. Few thought Trump could really do it, whereas much of Britain has begun to view Farage as inevitable.

But is he really such a certainty? Farage used conference to announce that he thinks he might be prime minister as early as 2027. The Reform expectation is that there may well be a fiscal meltdown in the next 12 months leading to the departure of Rachel Reeves as chancellor, a currency crisis, inflation, an austerity budget, mass defection of left-wing Labour MPs to the new Corbyn party and an early election. Far-fetched, perhaps, but British politics is so febrile at present it's hard to rule anything out.

Elements of Reform remain clownish, conspiratorial and amateur. Malhotra linked the royal family's recent bouts of cancer to Covid vaccinations. Connolly said she wants to help Reform overhaul the criminal justice system.

Farage's economic plans are fiscally incoherent, and many of his promises come soaked in snake oil. Senior figures in the party are disappointed by its failure to attract many big donors so far, and believe it must raise £10 million by next May's local elections to keep the show fully on the road. There are hushed fears that we may have hit "peak Farage". Hubris may yet meet nemesis.

But it's also the case that Farage's immense political skill, aided by the persistent shortcomings of successive governments, have allowed him to weld together a movement of potentially irresistible force. "It's an unstoppable juggernaut already," Reform activist John Howard, a website designer from Bangor, told me. "On the doorsteps, we're seeing something amazing. I've just had half of our local Conservative association quit and join our branch. Something exceptional is happening."

So then, here we go, here we go, here we ... go?

Keir's turbulent term has made the light blue brigade seem less risky

Luke Tryl

If last summer, in the afterglow of Labour's general election victory, I had told you that a little over a year later Sir Keir Starmer's party would slip to be just three or four points ahead of the recently defeated Conservatives, you might have dismissed it as early midterm blues.

Not ideal for the government, but not unprecedented. If then I told you Labour was two or three points ahead of the Tories, not in the battle for first but for second place – with Reform UK more than ten points clear of both – you might have started to question my psephological credentials. Yet that is the world we find ourselves in today.

It is easy to say with hindsight, but perhaps we should not be so surprised at what has happened since last July. The seeds of Labour's woes can be traced back to their loveless landslide. Labour won a triple-figure majority on barely a third of the vote – a broad but shallow coalition united only by the desire for change. Unlike previous new governments, Starmer's administration came in with little political capital to burn, and burn it it did.

From a public opinion perspective, the original sin was the winter fuel allowance. The decision to means-test the payment came to define the new government. In focus group conversations, voters explained that they felt Labour had been duplicitous for omitting it from their manifesto, that they were taking money from the most vulnerable, and disrespecting the contribution of those who spent their lives "doing their bit".

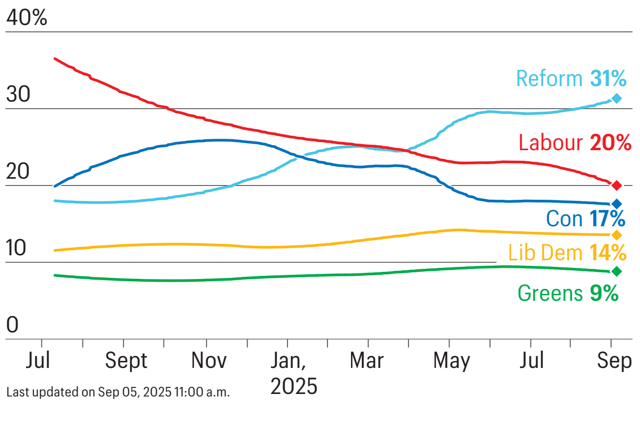
Subsequent fiscal decisions compounded the government's woes, giving the impression it is targeting groups that attract significant public sympathy: farmers, small businesses and the disabled. At the same time, the salience of migration – long Labour's Achilles' heel – has continued to climb. As voters become increasingly frustrated with both main parties' repeated failure to deliver on promises to control immigration, the problem now eclipses the NHS as one of the public's top concerns, second only to the cost of living. On the flip side, genuinely popular policies that poll well – including Rayner's workers' rights package and the minimum wage rise – have been drowned out. Asked in a recent poll to describe Labour's biggest success in a word, the most common answer was "nothing".

A reshuffle might help the government refocus internally, but for the public the buck stops at the top. Starmer's approval rating started tumbling almost as soon as he entered office, and apart from a slight bounce from his mediator role after the Trump-Zelensky Oval Office clash, it has never really recovered. It sits at minus 41. His approval decline has been quicker than any recent prime minister, and Labour's poll ratings have tanked in tandem into the low twenties.

Zooming out, the government's biggest problem can be boiled down to the fact the public think they are too much of the same. The electorate has voted for radical change in four national elections: Brexit in 2016, the Corbyn surge in 2017, Boris Johnson in 2019 and Starmer last year. Yet on every occasion, the public have been left feeling that change hasn't followed. Starmer's challenge isn't just Nigel Farage – it's that seven in ten Britons believe the government represents more of the same of the last government.

UK OPINION POLLING

Latest voting intention



Last updated on Sep 05, 2025 11:00 a.m.

That's where Angela Rayner's resignation comes in. Yes, the government has lost one of its best communicators, able to reach the voters other politicians struggle to – focus groups variously describe Rayner as "ballsy", "authentic'; daring to "speak her mind" where others don't. But the bigger danger of her departure is that it confirms the public's sense that this government is just as chaotic as the last. After the perma-crisis of the late Conservatives, Starmer's promise of a politics that "treads more lightly" appealed to voters. Yet between the freebies scandal, jittery markets, U-turns on disability benefits and winter fuel, and the resignation of the deputy prime minister, politics seems to be just loud.

That in turn has the effect of "de-risking" Reform UK. The insurgent party may be untested, but with both the Tories and Labour looking chaotic, many swing voters in our focus groups ask how bad can Reform be.

Reform have capitalised on that public frustration with the lack of change. It is hard to overstate the scale of the party's growth, and how much Reform's appeal has broadened since the election. With the Conservatives electorally irrelevant, Reform UK is appealing to segments of the population that Farage's previous parties never reached: barely one in five of Reform UK's supporters voted for Ukip or the Brexit Party in previous elections; only two in five even voted for Reform last year. Trying to create a demographic profile of Reform UK's voters, our team recently concluded that the average Reform voter now looks strikingly similar to the average Brit.

And, of course, Labour isn't just losing votes to its right; it is also losing an equal number of disgruntled voters to the left. With a new Green leader, and a Corbyn-led party of the left (which polls suggest could win the backing of one in ten voters), Labour's struggle to hold on to its progressive base could worsen.

The good news for Labour is that the electoral volatility that drove their ratings drop appears to be the new normal. The last time the polling picture remained broadly stable for more than two years was 2011. In the aftermath of the Hartlepool by-election, with an inflatable Boris soaring in the sky, Starmer also looked to be staring at oblivion, only to end up in Downing Street three years later. What goes down, can come up – especially with four years to the next election, but it will take a lot more than a reshuffle to make that happen. Labour will have to show people it is delivering the change they desperately want, and crucially make sure they're feeling that change too.

Luke Tryl is the UK director of More in Common

BAND OF GOLDSMITH

JAMES WHATLING/KELVIN BRUCE

Guests at the Cotswolds wedding yesterday of Zac Goldsmith, 50, and Hermione Fleming, 34, included the Tory peer's sister, Jemima, far left, Boris and Carrie Johnson with their daughter Poppy, and the film-maker Trudie Styler, wife of Sting. Goldsmith's third wife is a great-niece of the James Bond author Ian Fleming

Daily obesity pill on its way to Britain

The US pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly says Britons will be among the first people in the world to receive Orforglipron

Shaun Lintern Health Editor

Britain will be one of the first countries in the world to get a fat-busting once-a-day pill next year, an Eli Lilly executive said.

More than 1.5 million people in the UK inject themselves every week with weight-loss drugs, driving billions of pounds in sales for pharmaceutical firms

From next year, the battle against obesity will become even easier. Lilly – one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world and the manufacturer of Mounjaro – promises its tablet will bring the weight-loss revolution to millions more people uneasy about injecting themselves and opens up the prospects of supplying developing countries more easily.

Patrik Jonsson, the international president of the US-based Lilly, believes the pill – Orforglipron – could be a "game-changer" for the weight-loss industry, which could be worth $100 billion by 2030.

"The UK will be one of the first countries," said Jonsson, 59. "I would expect to see Orforglipron in the UK in 2026, subject to regulatory approval."

The company is also investigating a holy grail of obesity treatments – a single shot that could "cure" obesity for good. "The dream for our researchers, what inspires them," Jonsson said, "is actually a once-and-done treatment on obesity. You get one shot and then you're taken care of for the rest of your life."

Such a drug was years away, he cautioned, but confirmed candidates were being actively researched. "If we could be the ones that bring a once-and-done to treating obesity, that would be a huge contribution to humanity."

While this might be a pipe dream, the prospect of a daily pill is just around the corner. According to the latest clinical trial results announced last month, Orforglipron delivered clinically meaningful weight loss of about 10 per cent, with 40 per cent of patients losing up to 15 per cent of their weight.

While this is less than the 20 per cent patients might achieve by injecting Mounjaro, the tablet can be taken without food or water restrictions and is much easier to manufacture, store and transport. It is likely to be cheaper to buy than the injectable versions of the drugs although Lilly has yet to reveal the price.

> **The dream for our researchers is a once-and-done treatment where you're set for life**

The drugs work by mimicking natural hormones in the body that curtail cravings and appetite, slow down digestion and control blood sugars.

They are not without risk. They can have serious side-effects including gastrointestinal problems and pancreatitis. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has received hundreds of reports of acute and chronic pancreatitis, including ten deaths, among people taking all versions of the drugs. Regardless, demand for them has created a huge private market after the NHS warned it will take 12 years or more to roll out the jabs to the 3.4 million people eligible to receive it.

Online pharmacies and high street chains are selling the drugs for between £150 and £300 a month but there are concerns private users may be unaware of the need for strength-training exercises. Some studies suggest a third of the weight loss can be lean muscle, putting patients at risk of becoming frail.

Jonsson accepted Eli Lilly and other drug companies had a responsibility to educate people and provide information, adding: "We are stating very clearly on our label that all of those studies have been conducted in combination with dietary instructions and exercise."

Once a person stops taking the medicines, if they have not also made lifestyle and diet changes, they can put the weight back on. This could mean some patients will require treatment for life.

Jonsson defended this, saying obesity needed to be seen as a chronic disease driven by both biological and genetic factors. Such concerns would never be raised about a diabetes patient or a patient with rheumatoid arthritis, he said. "Obesity itself generates more than 200 comorbidities. Those comorbidities include type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer. So if you look at obesity through that lens, it is obvious that we should be treating the disease."

While companies such as Lilly are making billions from selling the drugs – it is predicting total revenue of $60 billion (£44 billion) this year, the market for injections has a limit.

Jonsson said many patients did not want to inject themselves, adding: "If I take the combined capacity of ourselves and the competition, we cannot meet the global needs with injectables. [With the pill] I think we have an opportunity to reach patients in parts of the world where we don't rely on the cold chain. It is an opportunity to really scale and provide treatment for patients that we otherwise wouldn't access or who wouldn't consider an injectable."

The company is highly secretive about where the pill will be made but it is expected the large 170-acre Lilly plant in Kinsale, Co Cork, Ireland, will be among the sites making the active ingredient. Speaking from there last week, Jonsson confirmed: "This site is going to play a role in the project."

Last week he was in Downing Street lobbying the British government to increase its spending on drugs.

"Six months ago we assessed whether we should open another European manufacturing site. The UK didn't make it to the list because the conditions are not competitive enough."

He pointed to data showing the UK spent 9 per cent of its healthcare budget on medicines compared with an OECD average of 14 per cent.

Eli Lilly had pledged to open a £279 million Gateway Lab site in London that would be an incubator for next-generation drugs but the company announced a pause in the investment this year in response to the government's lack of ambition on life sciences.

Jonsson said: "We have not closed the doors to the UK, not by any means. But we need to see some signs from the UK government that they really are making a bet on the life science industry.

"When I started in the industry, 55 per cent of all of the innovative medicines actually came out of Europe. Today, it's around 35 per cent.

"We're losing ground to China, we're losing ground to the US. We have a really important decision to make. Do we want to be in or out?"

MP sheds eight stone after trolls drive her to try weight-loss jabs

Caroline Wheeler
Political Editor

A Labour MP has said she used weight jabs to lose more than eight stone after online trolls made fun of her size and appearance.

Carolyn Harris was a size 24 and weighed 19 stone when she started taking Mounjaro in October. The weekly injection can help people lose 20 per cent of their weight. Almost a year later, Harris, 64, who is on the highest weekly dose of 15mg, weighs 11 stone and is a size 10.

Harris, a former barmaid and dinner lady, has recently donated 47 bags of clothes, which are now too big for her, to charity. "The abuse I was receiving online was horrendous and I made the decision to try Mounjaro," said Harris, who has since quit the social media platform X.

"I thought that if I didn't have purple hair and wasn't so fat then the abuse would stop. Although I made the decision for all the wrong reasons, it has actually done me a favour – I am now healthier than I have ever been and fully in control of my weight for the first time in my life. Friends don't recognise me."

Harris, who is paying for a private prescription and has never spent more than £150 a month on the jabs, says she has a "little bit further to go" before reaching her ideal weight.

However, like many of the 750,000 people in the UK who are thought to be using Mounjaro, she faces paying hundreds of pounds extra a month if she wants to continue the treatment. Harris, who was elected as MP for Neath & Swansea East in 2015, was informed by her doctor last week that the cost of a month's supply of the 15mg dose is going up to £429.

The manufacturer, Eli Lilly, said last month it was raising the list price of the drug by as much as 170 per cent after President Trump complained about the high cost of the jabs in the US.

The firm subsequently pledged to work with pharmacies to keep prices lower.

Harris is among the nine in ten Mounjaro users who pay for the drug in the UK and said she could probably afford to continue buying it. However, she has written to Wes Streeting, the health secretary, to ask him to help others less fortunate than herself.

In the letter, shared with The Sunday Times, Harris, who is a menopause campaigner, said the impact of the price rise was of "huge concern" and called on him to work with the manufacturers to "keep the cost for patient at, or near, the current level". "This would enable those already benefiting from using the product to continue to do so safely, and those who wish to start and are able to pay the broadly affordable prices to access the treatment through a private healthcare provider," she added. "This would keep the NHS waiting list at a lower level."

Harris, who has asked to meet Streeting to discuss the price rises, described Mounjaro as a "potentially life-saving treatment" that could save the NHS millions. "Even at its current prices, private prescriptions are beyond the reach of many. Any significant increase will make it unaffordable to the vast majority," she said.

Harris, who previously served as Starmer's parliamentary private secretary and is now his trade envoy to New Zealand, said she received "horrendous" and "relentless abuse" after an image of her in the House of Commons was widely shared in 2021. She told Streeting she now felt "healthier and happier", adding: "I am certain that I have changed my relationship with food for good and reduced my risk of life-threatening illness."

Streeting has previously described weight loss jabs as the "talk of the House of Commons tea rooms" following the admission by several MPs, including Robert Jenrick, the shadow justice secretary, that they have used them.

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Carolyn Harris says she has never felt healthier after her dramatic weight loss

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The 9/11 ‘plotter’ that we let

Just ten days after the September 11 attacks in 2001, armed police gathered in the early evening mist on a street of semi-detached properties near the centre of Birmingham. After bursting in to one of them they found Omar al-Bayoumi, a mature student from Aston University watching his home nation, Saudi Arabia, thrashing Bahrain in a World Cup qualifier on television.

This outgoing, affable man had been linked by the FBI to the 9/11 hijackers who flew the plane into the Pentagon. Officers from West Midlands police arrested him and began searching his home, passing on evidence to the FBI.

They found videos and paperwork which would link him to the hijackers in the US, yet just seven days later he would be released. Now, as we approach the 24th anniversary on Thursday, Bayoumi stands accused of being a Saudi agent who helped the hijackers carry out the worst terrorist attack in history. Here we tell the full story of Bayoumi’s links to the hijackers and how he was let go and is about to be at the centre of a trillion-dollar court battle seeking compensation for victims and their families.

Omar al-Bayoumi in a video that showed detailed footage of the US Capitol

> “ **West Midlands police found crucial evidence in his garage**

THE BIRMINGHAM CONNECTION

Born in 1957 in the village of Al Hijra, near Jeddah, Omar Ahmed Moustafa al-Bayoumi moved to San Diego in 1994 to study English, taking classes at several universities before gaining a master’s degree.

His studies were sponsored by his employer, the Saudi Presidency of Civil Aviation, and he was also said to have been sent “on loan” to Dallah Avco, an aviation services company, where he received as much as $6,500 a month, in addition to an annual $90,000 education stipend and cash payments of at least $15,000 a month. In its recent ruling, the court said the inflated amounts of money were logically linked to Bayoumi’s support to the hijackers.

In San Diego, he lived at three different addresses with his wife and children, ending up in Parkwood Apartments on Mount Ada Road. Bayoumi was a keen squash player and socialised mainly with friends from the Islamic Centre of San Diego. It was in 1998 that he first came to the attention of the US authorities. He had been reported to the FBI when a maintenance man reported seeing a box beneath the sink in his apartment with wires coming out of it.

Rick Lambert, head of the FBI’s San Diego field office at the time, told The Sunday Times: “Members of the local Muslim community who knew him spoke about him always filming everything and they suspected he was a Saudi spy placed there to monitor the activities and report back any dissident behaviour.”

The investigation was closed in 1999, as he was not seen as a risk to the US.

In October 2000, Bayoumi flew to Birmingham to enrol for a PhD in business management at Aston University. At first he lived in university accommodation and became president of the Saudi students’ club. Then, in November 2000, he flew back to the US and spent two months in San Diego, according to court documents. In March and April 2001 he returned to San Diego, coming back to the UK in June 2001. He met his wife and four children at the airport before they all travelled to Saudi Arabia.

Bayoumi met the Pentagon hijackers Khalid al-Mihdhar and, bottom, Nawaf al-Hazmi

On July 16, 2001, the family returned to the UK and Bayoumi moved them all into the Highgate area of Birmingham, a ten-minute drive from the university’s business school in his BMW, and next to the city’s central mosque. Bayoumi still received generous funding for his education, along with a stipend from Saudi Arabia. The university described him as an “exemplary student” who regularly used the prayer room at the university’s Islamic society.

LINK TO THE HIJACKERS

At 8.46am on September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists flew the first hijacked aircraft into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Seventeen minutes later, as the world watched on television screens across the globe, a second aircraft hurtled into the southern tower.

At 9.37am a third aircraft divebombed into the Pentagon, and at 10.03am the final aircraft, believed to have been destined for the Capitol or the White House in Washington, crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers overpowered the hijackers. In total, 2,977 people were killed.

The FBI quickly uncovered links between Bayoumi and two of the hijackers on the Pentagon aircraft. Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar had been the first of the terrorists to arrive in the US, flying from Thailand to Los Angeles on January 15, 2000 after attending a high-level al-Qaeda meeting in Malaysia.

The CIA had monitored the gathering and had photos of both men, but they then slipped off the agency’s radar.

FBI agents found a blue Toyota Corolla the men had used at Washington’s Dulles airport, which eventually led them to Parkwood Apartments in San Diego.

Lambert said: “The apartments’ manager and others told us how the hijackers were often seen in the company of an older man who they identified as Omar Bayoumi. They told us about a gathering he’d held in the hijackers’ apartment, which was next to his own home, just days after Mihdhar and Hazmi moved in.”

The FBI found Bayoumi’s signature on the lease agreement for the apartment, which was in the same block as his. He also wrote the hijackers a cheque for $1,558 to cover the deposit and first month’s rent. He had questions to answer, but was now living in the UK.

The FBI wrote to the Met on September 17, 2001 with evidence regarding Bayoumi’s involvement with the hijackers. This formed the basis of an FBI warrant for the Met to arrest Bayoumi.

Within days another FBI letter was sent to the Met containing information for use in interrogating Bayoumi. The FBI had no jurisdiction in the UK so the work was done by Metropolitan Police’s counterterrorism unit, then called SO13, alongside West Midlands police. Behind the scenes, the FBI called the shots.

ARMED RAID IN BIRMINGHAM

At 6pm on September 21, armed police raided Bayoumi’s home in Dymoke Street, Birmingham. He was accused of “the preparation, instigation and commission of acts of terrorism in the United States”. He was taken to the high-security Paddington Green station in London.

Detective Constable David Campbell, now in his late fifties and retired, was the officer sent to collect Bayoumi from Birmingham. At 34, he was the youngest officer in SO13. Bright and driven, his motivation to fight terrorism stemmed from growing up in Belfast in the Troubles.

He remembers sitting in the back of the police car with Bayoumi as they sped down the motorway, lights flashing. He has never spoken publicly about it. “It was a hairy drive back,” he recalls. “Those guys had that car on the limit.”

Once at Paddington Green, Bayoumi was processed and put in a cell alongside Lotfi Raissi, an Algerian who was arrested in Colnbrook, Berkshire, and accused of training the Pentagon hijackers.

Raissi’s French wife, Sonia, and his brother, Mohamed, were also detained. Raissi would be held in Belmarsh prison in south London for five months before being released without charge. They were later exonerated.

Officers began searching Bayoumi’s house, where he had moved just days earlier, and his office at Aston University.

Within 24 hours, West Midlands police discovered papers on a shelf in his garage that they believed to be crucial evidence: a yellow lined notepad containing a crude hand-drawn sketch in blue ink of an aircraft, along with detailed flight equations and calculations. It was bagged and marked as “category 1” – of critical importance – with a note explaining its significance. Labelled as exhibit PSS/34, it was passed to the FBI.

Other items found included Bayoumi’s 150-page address book containing names and numbers for Saudi diplomats in London and Washington, as well as senior figures at US mosques tied to radicals.

Officers also discovered more than 80 videos, including one labelled “Washington trip June 23, 1999-July 4”. It contained about one hour of detailed footage of the US Capitol Building and its environs, with close-ups of entrances, exits, architectural features, windows, surrounding streets and visible security, including police officers. Another video in the collection was labelled “24 hours fitness. New members’ information guide” and showed Bayoumi with Hazmi and Mihdhar at a gathering in their San Diego apartment – close to Bayoumi’s – with more than 20 other men.

To preserve the custody chain of the collected evidence, all evidence seized from Bayoumi’s home had to be collected, bagged and labelled by the Met and immediately handed to FBI liaison officers based in London for analysis.

The analysts reported their findings to an FBI agent, who fed what was deemed relevant information into the “tunnel” – a channel back to the British officers – with no analysis or further investigation by the Met. Campbell and the other investigating officer, Detective Constable Ian Dean, from West Midlands police, then used it in their interrogation of Bayoumi.

THE INTERROGATION TAPES

The Sunday Times has obtained the 900 pages of transcripts and almost 11 hours of recordings of these custody interviews, which were lodged in a US court. It is the first time they have been heard publicly. The interviews began on September 22, 2001. Under the Terrorism Act 2000, Bayoumi could be held for seven days before he had to be charged or released.

The detectives began by asking Bayoumi about his life in the US, which he answered in perfect English. “He was very, very measured, very calm, very collected, very as if he just knew what to say,” Campbell remembers. “I got the impression from his physical demeanour and the way he spoke that he had been trained in counterinterrogation.”

After persistent questioning Bayoumi admits he had acted as guarantor for a rented home in San Diego, for two men he met by chance in a restaurant. Hazmi and Mihdhar were in the US to learn English, he claims they told him. He gave them his number and said they could look him up in San Diego if they needed any help. Just days later, the pair turned up at the Islamic Centre in San Diego asking for help finding an apartment and opening a bank account.

Bayoumi offered to help. He told them an apartment in his block was available and wrote them a cheque. In the interview, Bayoumi volunteers information about VHS videotapes found at his home, telling officers that one shows a party he organised at the apartment of the two hijackers in February 2000.

He is quizzed about his finances and a series of unknown payments that arrive in his accounts, all below $10,000. Anything above that figure would have to be reported as suspicious. At no point is the aircraft drawing mentioned because the detectives have not been told about it.

During the week, Bayoumi reportedly received regular visits from senior Saudi officials based at the Saudi embassy in London. And during his interviews he appeared to prefer the advice of the Saudi embassy over the counsel of his legal representative in the room.

In the book he wrote about his arrest, Raissi claimed an attaché from the Saudi Arabian embassy was present “from the start” for Bayoumi, while he and his wife were initially denied consular visits from the Algerian and French embassies.

By the end of the week, the detectives had made up their minds. They told Bayoumi they believed he knew the hijackers were travelling to the US, that the chance meeting in the café was arranged and that he brought them to San Diego himself.

The cash deposits in his bank were wired to him so he could help the hijackers – and maybe others. He also introduced them to other people who would assist them. The police could come to two conclusions, Campbell tells Bayoumi in an interview. Either Bayoumi is a very unlucky man, or he helped those people knowing their aims and goals, and in doing so was “equally as guilty as the hijackers who crashed the aircraft and killed all those people”.

No, Bayoumi says: “I don’t have any involvement in this situation at all.” He says that one day the truth will appear. “There’s only one version of the truth, Omar,” Campbell responds.

After the final interview on September 28, 2001, Campbell and Dean left for Scotland Yard to join a conference call to the

go

Days after the atrocity, police in Birmingham arrested a Saudi man suspected of aiding the hijackers. They found an aircraft sketch and film of Washington landmarks. But within days he was a free man. Can the victims' trillion-dollar lawsuit uncover the truth, ask *Amardeep Bassey, Liz Harris* and *Caroline Wheeler*

Omar al-Bayoumi, left, finished his master's degree at Aston University after he was released and then returned to Saudi Arabia

US Department of Justice. With them were Detective Chief Superintendent John Bunn and Deputy Assistant Commissioner Alan Fry. Campbell and Dean spent an hour presenting their case. "I tried my very, very best to convince the US justice department that they needed to extradite him," Campbell recalls.

The case had "stunk to high heaven", he says. "There were too many coincidences. If that guy played the lottery, he'd be winning every single week."

The officers expected the official would review the evidence and come back to them with a decision. But the Department of Justice official's decision was instant. "He said there was insufficient evidence to justify extradition." Campbell remembers. "I was gobsmacked … that was a pretty devastating result. Jaw-dropping."

At the end of the call, there was a long silence as the officers digested the news.

"I still think about it," Campbell says, "and I'm still shocked to this day.

Bayoumi continued his studies at Aston, leaving in 2002 with a master's degree in management research. The police kept his passport and belongings until May 2, 2002, when he reported back to Paddington Green station.

Officers had been instructed by the FBI to return to him everything seized from his homes – including the videos and item No 32: the aircraft sketch.

Seven copies of all the evidence were made, as was standard Met protocol, with one copy sent to the FBI via the legal attaché at the US embassy in London.

In August 2002, Bayoumi left the UK for Saudi Arabia for good, taking all the original evidence with him.

It would be 20 years before Campbell found out that he had not been presented with all the evidence and had been denied the opportunity to quiz Bayoumi about the aircraft sketch.

'I'M NO SAUDI AGENT'

In the aftermath of the attacks, the US set up the 9/11 Commission to provide a definitive account of what had happened and how prepared the US was for the attacks. In October 2003, representatives of the commission visited Riyadh to interview Bayoumi and other Saudi officials.

Two generals from the kingdom's secret police agency, the Mahabith, sat in attendance as Philip Zelikow, the commission's executive director, quizzed him in English. Bayoumi repeated the story he had told SO13 two years earlier – that he had met the hijackers by chance. He told the US investigators he was "peaceful" and "tolerant of others" and that he'd been upset at being labelled a Saudi spy.

When he saw the 9/11 attacks unfold while he was in the UK, he said he thought he was watching "some sort of horror or disaster movie" and that he had felt for the victims, as his young daughter was a US citizen.

The 9/11 Commission published its report in 2004. It looked at Bayoumi's role and concluded there was "no credible evidence that he believed in violent extremism or knowingly aided violent extremism or knowingly aided extremist groups". Yet the inquiry did not have all of the evidence found at the Birmingham house. The commission never saw the aircraft sketch or so-called Capitol Hill "casing video", and was given a heavily edited and truncated version of the party footage. The transcripts and recordings of Bayoumi's police interviews were also not handed to the commission.

> **I am still shocked to this day that the US decided not to pursue him**

VICTIMS' SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Terry Strada has become a central figure in the fight for compensation for victims of 9/11. Her husband, Tom, 41, was working as a corporate broker for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 104th floor of the northern tower of the World Trade Center when the first aircraft struck. He rang Terry after it happened.

"There was a real panic in his voice, something I'd never heard before," she recalls. "And he said, 'Terry, the building's been hit by a f***ing airplane'.

"I never for a moment thought the north tower would come down until it did. My life right there changed for ever."

Their fourth child, Justin, had been born just four days earlier. Strada recalls that earlier that morning, "Tom came into the nursery and he bent down and he kissed him on his tiny little toes and he said, 'I'll see you later, baby'."

Tom went downstairs, and before he left he turned around. "He said, 'I love you and I'll be home early, around two'," Strada says. "And that was the last time I ever saw my husband alive."

Two weeks after 9/11, President George W Bush, told the nation that "no government had officially supported al-Qaeda in this attack".

That November, Strada found out about a meeting for the families of 9/11 victims and attended. It was held by Ron Motley, a lawyer from a firm in New Jersey. His firm, Ness, Motley, Loadholt, Richardson & Poole, was proposing a lawsuit to hold accountable the enablers they alleged had provided material support to al-Qaeda. These included banks, charities and individuals, along with the country that from day one was linked to 15 of the 19 hijackers: Saudi Arabia.

By August 2002, several hundred families had signed up to the 9/11 Families United to Bankrupt Terrorism – and filed a trillion-dollar lawsuit.

But the case ran into difficulties when the courts deemed that Saudi Arabia was protected by the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA), under which foreign states could not be sued in US courts unless they were designated a state sponsor of terrorism. It forced the families to fight for years to amend the law.

Finally, in 2018, they were able to begin their lawsuit and started pursuing documents from Saudi Arabia, questioning its witnesses under oath and issuing subpoenas to third parties – including US government agencies such as the FBI. In addition, the lawyers used the Hague Evidence Convention to seek records regarding Bayoumi held by the Met.

They got High Court orders requiring the Met to disclose the evidence it retained from its investigations into Bayoumi. The Met's disclosures raised questions as to why the FBI had not provided the same materials to the 9/11 families.

The bureau's own documents confirm that the FBI received all the seized evidence at the time, yet much of that evidence never showed up in subsequent FBI reporting, and appears not to have been shared with relevant FBI field offices or with the 9/11 Commission.

THE MISSING NOTEBOOK

In 2012, an FBI evidence technician was clearing out a storeroom in a police lock-up in Washington. Buried in a pile of documents and folders in a crate marked "Omar al-Bayoumi" was a lined notebook with a hand-drawn sketch of an aircraft with a formula written above it and sums scrawled beneath.

The technician called officers working on Operation Encore, an internal FBI investigation into whether individuals connected to the Saudi government had knowingly assisted Hazmi and Mihdhar during their time in southern California.

The operation had been set up in 2007 by FBI agents from the San Diego and New York field offices who were unconvinced by the findings of the 9/11 Commission and were suspicious of Bayoumi's role. One was Daniel Gonzalez, an FBI case officer in San Diego involved in investigating the hijackers' network on the West Coast – including Bayoumi.

He believes the commission's findings "do not stand up to scrutiny in light of what we know now".

He told The Sunday Times: "They had the broad outlines of the hijackers' movements, but they were unable to find many of the most important details. When they said Bayoumi had nothing to do with it, I said, 'no, I don't see the same'."

Then he was sent a copy of the aircraft diagram found by the technician. "Even before having it analysed, I could tell the significance," he says. "You just have to use your common sense."

Gonzalez took it to a pilot with 20 years' experience, who said the formula could be used to manually compute an aircraft's descent rate towards a target without GPS landing aids, something not typically taught in basic flight training.

The numbers on the sketch corresponded to distances between beacons on the eastern seaboard and some of the targets of the attacks. These findings, though, remained classified until September 2021, when President Biden issued an executive order declassifying hundreds of key FBI documents and secret reports related to the attacks – including from Operation Encore.

Campbell says this is when he found out about its existence. "I was shocked. I felt frustration for the victims, because it would have been a game-changer in how we interviewed Bayoumi if we'd had it at the time," he says.

The declassified Operation Encore materials portrayed Bayoumi as someone tied to Saudi religious and possibly intelligence networks. It references a 2017 assessment by the FBI's Arabian Peninsula Squad, which had concluded Bayoumi was a "co-optee" of the Saudi secret service. It found the assistance given to Hazmi and Mihdhar was consistent with a co-ordinated support operation, rather than a series of chance encounters, and involved individuals with official connections to Saudi Arabia.

Lawyers for the 9/11 families issued a deposition to put the allegations to Bayoumi, and interviewed him on June 9 and 10, 2021, via Zoom from Saudi Arabia. Now in his sixties, Bayoumi tells them he worked for Saudi Arabia for 38 years and talked of his time "studying" in San Diego. He is then quizzed about the aircraft diagram for the first and only time. He admits it is in his handwriting. When asked what it depicts, he says: "So I'm somebody who likes to read. I'm somebody who likes to be exposed to things. Perhaps this was an equation that we studied before in high school and I was trying to remember whether I'm going to be able to figure out and solve it or not."

He is asked: what was the reason you were calculating the height of the aircraft from Earth in miles?

Bayoumi replies: "It's an equation like any other equation. Like, say, when they say what is the distance of the road between San Diego to LA or Washington to other places. It's just an equation to measure distance. To Baltimore."

Despite his denials, lawyers for the 9/11 families believe it is a crucial piece of evidence. In 2022 and 2023, further evidence was disclosed to the families' lawyers in the US court.

It included the video labelled "Washington trip June 1999", found in exhibit PSS/100, the bag of tapes Campbell and Dean had brought to the interview room.

Containing just over an hour's footage, with Bayoumi narrating, it shows him filming Washington landmarks. He refers to "the plan" and finishes off the video by saying: "O beloved, esteemed brothers, a greeting to you from Omar al-Bayoumi."

> **The video had all the hallmarks of al-Qaeda casing a terrorist target**

Bassem Youssef, a former FBI agent, has said the video bears all the characteristics of al-Qaeda casing a terrorist target.

The Met had provided copies of all the tapes to the FBI, yet the Washington trip video was never produced for the 9/11 Commission. It hadn't even been shared with its own field agents, its sister agency the CIA, or Congress.

Campbell says: "I understand from my previous background, with previous investigations, that this is quite simply a reconnaissance video, and no one can tell me any different. I feel frustration for the victims because I sincerely believe that had I been made aware of the plane sketch and this video, I would have taken Bayoumi to the cleaners on both those pieces of evidence."

Gavin Simpson, a lawyer for the 9/11 families, believes it is more significant.

He told the court in the US: "The evidence is clear that Saudi Arabia deployed its officials and agents to serve in an illegal government enterprise that was extensively intertwined with terrorism, so that the agents were acting within their core mission when they helped integrate the hijackers into the United States."

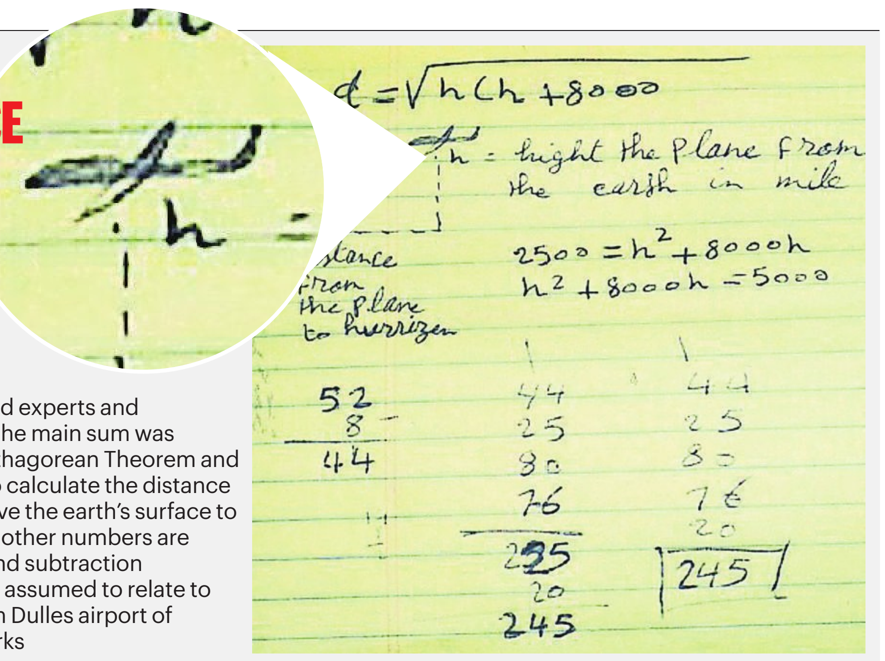
He submitted a graphic to court, exhibit 701, which claims to show the al-Qaeda network and relationships with the 9/11 hijackers. It includes Bayoumi. Simpson told the court: "The Ministry of Islamic Affairs deployed, as part of its official activities, more than 25 propagators to southern California in the very period in which … Bayoumi [was] in post, and those, your honour, are only the ones we know about. We know about them because of the careful assembly of evidence by the Metropolitan Police Service that has gathered videos, photographs, thousands of pages of contemporaneous documents and Omar al-Bayoumi's own correspondence."

On August 28, Judge George Daniels, in the US district court for the southern district of Manhattan, said there was "reasonable evidence" Bayoumi and another Saudi had been sent by their government to the US to assist the hijackers. It paves the way for a full public trial.

A Met spokesman said it had given information to the US relating to 9/11 and continued to provide material for the court case. It declined to comment further. The FBI did not want to comment. Saudi Arabia denies all the allegations.

HIDDEN EVIDENCE

What the figures found in Bayoumi's notebook are believed to show


d=√h(h+8000
h = hight the plane from the earth in mile
stance from the plane to horrizen
2500 = h²+8000h
h²+8000h = 5000
52
8
44
44
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225
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245
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80
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245

The FBI consulted experts and concluded that the main sum was derived from Pythagorean Theorem and could be used to calculate the distance of an object above the earth's surface to the horizon. The other numbers are basic addition and subtraction calculations and assumed to relate to the mileage from Dulles airport of specific landmarks

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fscs

Protected

Spinning turbines into bike helmets

Turbines installed at the Sofia wind farm off the Yorkshire coast have recyclable blades

A dissolvable resin on the blades of a new breed of wind farm mean they can at last be recycled, rather than ending up in landfill

Ben Spencer Science Editor

It is supposedly the cleanest of green technologies – but wind power has a dirty secret. When turbines reach the end of their lifespan, the blades, which are notoriously difficult to recycle, are sent to landfill.

Until now these wind graveyards have been out of sight and out of mind, too small a problem to concern us, because the vast majority of turbines ever erected are still standing. But the problem is becoming more pressing, because they were designed with a lifespan of 20 to 25 years – and many of the wind farms from the early 2000s are running out of time.

About 600 turbines in UK waters are due to be decommissioned by 2030, according to the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult, a government-funded research group. The number of onshore turbines coming to the end of their lives is expected to be even higher.

Within a decade, the agency predicts, turbine blades weighing a combined 40,000 tonnes will need to be disposed of each year, taking up as much landfill as the household waste produced annually by a city the size of Bristol. "It's getting to the stage where the problem is imminent," said Katharine York, in charge of sustainability at the organisation.

Each blade from a large offshore turbine can be longer than a football pitch.

Fortunately, engineers are coming up with solutions. Off the Yorkshire coast, 120 miles out into the North Sea at the Sofia wind farm, 50 turbines have been installed in recent weeks with a new type of fully recyclable blade. Each of them towers 252 metres (827ft) above the waves, almost as tall as the Shard in London, which is 309 metres.

When the wind farm is completed next year, it will power 1.2 million homes. When it is decommissioned in the 2050s, those blades will be turned into everyday items such as bicycle helmets, suitcases and car dashboards.

The blades, made by Siemens Gamesa at its factory in Hull, are held together by a resin that can be dissolved once the wind farm has reached the end of its life. That means the materials that go into the 108m (354ft) blades – glass fibre and carbon fibre, bound with the resin around a wooden core – can be separated and reclaimed once the turbines are dismantled. Even the resin can be reused.

All that is required is acetic acid, warmed to about 80C, to dissolve the resin. "That is the same thing I use to clean my coffee machine at home," said Jonas Jensen, global head of sustainability at Siemens Gamesa. The additional cost of the new resin adds just 2 per cent to the total cost of each turbine.

Darren Davidson, vice-president of Siemens Energy UK and Ireland, said the development of the world's first recyclable blades had been a huge boost for Hull, where the company is one of the city's biggest employers. "We've developed the factory from nothing in the last ten years to a place where we employ 1,400 people, and we're doing market-leading innovation," said Davidson.

Sven Utermöhlen, chief executive of RWE Offshore Wind, which runs the Sofia wind farm, said just half of the blades used at that site would be recyclable, because there was a limited supply of resin when the order was put in. Supply of the resin, which is commercially produced by third parties, has since been increased, and the company hopes that eventually its entire supply chain will be "circular", with no waste. He said other parts of the turbines, particularly the steel towers, were already recyclable.

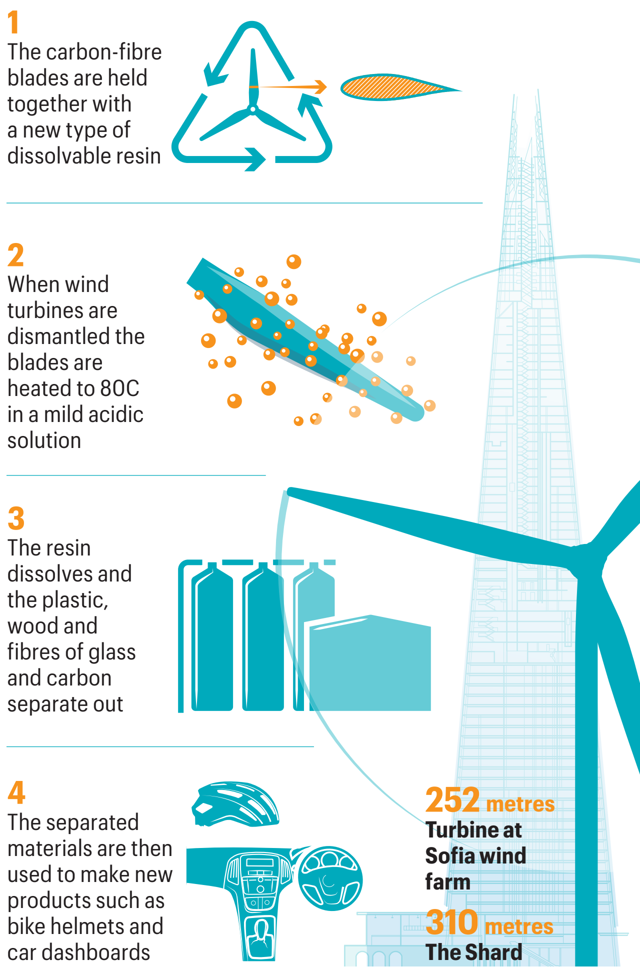
This just leaves the problem of the hundreds of turbine blades already installed, which cannot so easily be separated into their constituent parts. There are various ways to tackle the problem to avoid sending them to landfill.

"One is mechanical recycling, shredding the blades into really small pieces and then mixing it into construction products, such as cement and concrete," Utermöhlen said. "There is also a growing market for what you would call upcycling or repurposing – using them for playground equipment, furniture, bus shelters etc. But when you just look at the sheer volume being produced, the demand for repurposing probably will never be enough to really cover the issue."

A British start-up called Blue Parameters has an alternative solution for old turbine blades, which involves cutting them up and then subjecting them to heat and steam. "This allows the recovery of fibres, the resins, polymers and other chemicals," said James Scott-Anderson, its director. "This can be reused, with a very small percentage of waste."

Blue Parameters is trying to raise £185,000 to show it can recycle a single blade, and then £3.2 million for a processing plant in southwest England which will process 25 tonnes of waste a year.

HOW THE BLADES ARE RECYCLED



1 The carbon-fibre blades are held together with a new type of dissolvable resin

2 When wind turbines are dismantled the blades are heated to 80C in a mild acidic solution

3 The resin dissolves and the plastic, wood and fibres of glass and carbon separate out

4 The separated materials are then used to make new products such as bike helmets and car dashboards

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Now you can cry — Evita bows out from West End balcony

Emily Prescott
Arts and Entertainment Correspondent

Unusually for the West End, where tickets can cost up to £300, this performance was free. For two months Hollywood actress Rachel Zegler, playing Eva Perón in *Evita*, nightly stepped out on the theatre's balcony to sing *Don't Cry for Me Argentina* to the crowd gathered on the street below.

The audience in the theatre – who had paid for their tickets, unlike those standing on the street – watched on video screens.

For the final show last night, hundreds of people gathered to watch Zegler, 24, as they have done every night throughout the musical's run at the London Palladium.

Security staff control the crowds outside as, for about seven minutes about 9pm, Argyll Street in the West End becomes Buenos Aires.

For some, the outdoor performance has proved more powerful than watching from inside the auditorium.

On Friday evening, Claire Robertson, 53, a carer from Hammersmith, waited 2½ hours to secure a place near the front, to watch from this angle for the fourth time. "I've seen it inside as well. It's amazing – and it's actually even better out here," she said.

The director, Jamie Lloyd, has said the balcony sequence is key to Perón's story. She addressed crowds from balconies several times during her public life as Argentina's first lady, mainly at the Casa Rosada, the president's official workplace, in Buenos Aires.

Lloyd told GQ magazine: "Eva is delivering a speech that would be heard by thousands of people on a street, and people who would not necessarily buy tickets to be inside a theatre. It's about the intention. It has to make sense for the narrative, but it doesn't have to make sense literally."

Amreet Jahal, 29, a writer, said: "I saw it on opening night and we thought we should come and see this before its last night. Before, I was sceptical about whether the balcony scene would be effective. But when you're actually watching it, it makes complete sense within the context of the show. It's really moving, especially when it pans across the crowd with video into the theatre."

JACK TAYLOR

Rachel Zegler sings from the London Palladium balcony

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Rod Liddle

The idiot box increasingly does what it says on the tin, and the BBC's just making it more stupid

In the latest BBC TV programme for people who have had their brains sucked out through their ears via a long plastic straw, young singletons are transported to a deserted island with someone they have met for only five minutes on a dating app. Will their relationship work out? That's what nobody, anywhere, is asking.

This is *Stranded on Honeymoon Island*, a programme I have reason to believe was dreamt up by the former BBC director general Lord Reith at some time in 1927. "I think it would especially appeal to the viewing audience if the couples were seen to engage in vigorous coitus and also have to use the toilet in front of each other because there are no private bathrooms," he commented in diaries I have unearthed and nobody else has seen.

Reith was also behind other recent BBC series on a similar intellectual level, such as *Smoggie Queens*. "Get a few exhibitionist transsexuals from somewhere ghastly like Middlesbrough and have them make odious jokes about their private parts. It'll be a winner, believe me, and entirely in keeping with our mission to inform, educate and entertain."

The honeymoon island thing – a bastard, spavined offspring of about 20 previous dating shows – started its run in the week Melvyn Bragg announced he had stood down from presenting the rather wonderful *In Our Time* on BBC Radio 4. Lord Bragg had presented the show for 27 years and I had rather hoped he would continue doing so for another 27, even though he is now 85 years old.

It is one of those programmes which could not possibly have been dreamt up by a committee of the usual illiterate producers – Johnnie, Aisha and Olivia – because its strength lay simply in employing someone who was very well read to interview people who were similarly well read on any subject of his choosing. Yes, it was – like *The Brains Trust* – truly Reithian.

Bragg departed after a fairly hefty broadside last year against the corporation, which, he said, did not care about the arts or, for that matter, history. He added: "The BBC is given an enormous amount of money to lead the way with this stuff. By comparison, Phil Edgar-Jones, who has done terrifically as director of Sky Arts, has to find the money. But the BBC doesn't have that problem. And instead they let it all slip through their fingers. It's disgraceful, and they shouldn't be allowed to get away with it."

I agree with him, in general. Both history and arts coverage are always tainted with the tyranny of now, seen through a distorted prism. And they rarely tell you much more than you knew already, which can be terribly frustrating. Given that the promotion of the high arts and a regard for history were central to the original vision of what the BBC is supposed to be for, we can feel that we are being cheated a little. I dare say the BBC would classify Glastonbury as arts coverage but, despite those proposals I unearthed, I doubt that Lord Reith would.

> **To compete with Netflix, and Disney, it has clambered down to the bottom of the barrel**

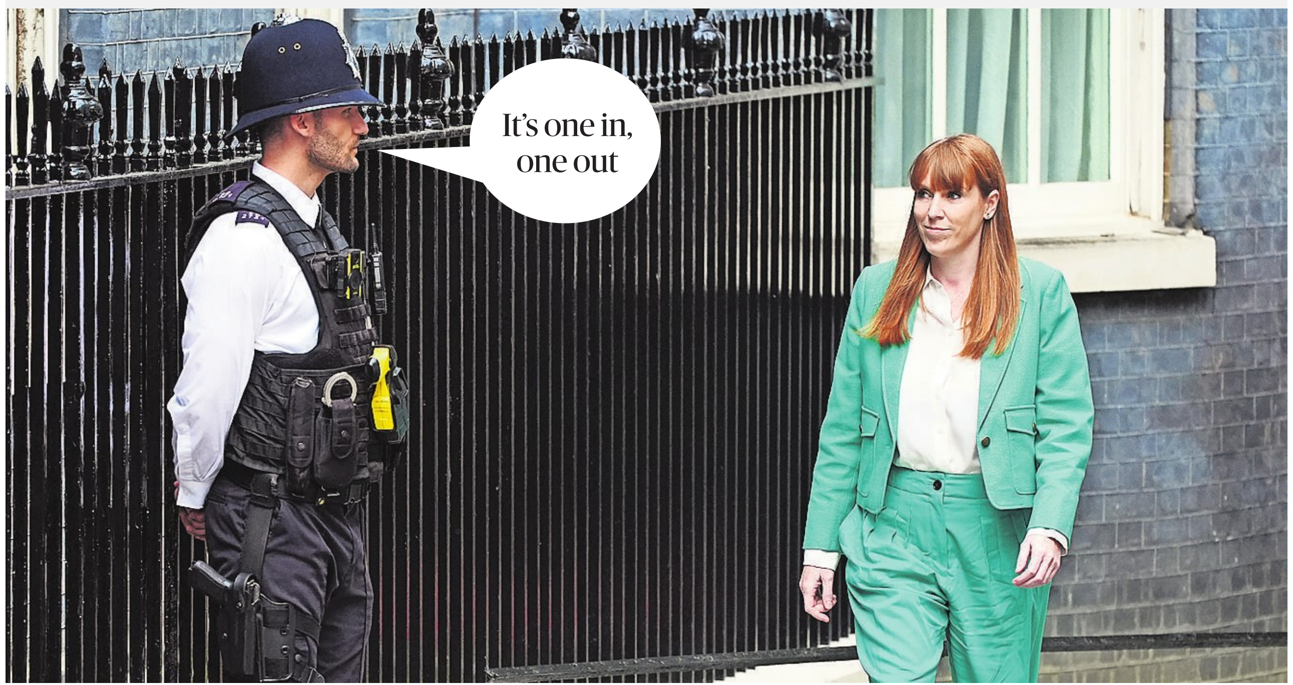
It is not wholly the fault of the BBC, however. It is caught in a trap which was not of its own devising. The funding system demands that it compete with not only the terrestrial channels but also Netflix, Apple+, Disney+ and so on, to pull in large audiences by clambering down to the bottom of the barrel and scraping up the filth with a teaspoon.

That is why it commissions a shallow copy of trash shows which have been broadcast elsewhere. If its audience figures fail to match those of its rivals, old and new, then its opponents will argue, with some justification, that it is no longer qualified to demand a licence fee from all of us. My own view – which I take a little sadly, as a former employee – is that that time has already long past. A subscription BBC, by contrast, would be able to broadcast far more stuff like *In Our Time* without having to demean itself in the process with *Stranded on Honeymoon Island*. I would pay for it.

And yet even this does not quite get us to the heart of the problem, which is more likely to be down to declining attention spans and a population which is far less well informed than once it was. Telling people serious, important stuff that they didn't already know isn't a terribly fashionable notion right now, because it requires on the part of the viewer or listener a degree of concentration and runs the risk of either boring or tiring them (much as does that diminishing art, reading). Our schools balk at the brutal imparting of knowledge, preferring a more democratic approach which has the effect of leaving the pupil mercifully uninformed but confident of their own opinions.

The idea that television should be intellectually challenging has largely evaporated and can be found today only in small oases on BBC4 and, increasingly rarely, Channel 4. Instead, the idiot box should do what it says on the tin and pander to idiots, a vibrant and expanding constituency within our country.

Reshuffle shock


It's one in, one out

PHOTOBUBBLE: NICK NEWMAN

Greens encourage inflation

I have been wanting to enhance the size of my breasts for several years now but have always shied away from invasive surgical procedures for reasons of cowardice. So I am delighted to learn from the new Green Party leader, Zack Polanski, that they might expand quite naturally under hypnotherapy.

I will give it a try, but I worry that it is simply part of the idiotic new left ideology which holds that people can be whatever they want to be and have whatever they want in this, the best of all possible worlds. You want larger breasts? You have them. Ignore the biological reality that they are the size and shape of fried eggs — their bulbous vastness is "your truth".

I worry a bit about the populist Mr Polanski generally, too. There is the whiff of Sinclair Lewis's Elmer Gantry about him. I have the feeling that he may be opposed to the use of all kinds of oil except that which derives from the serpent community.

Corbyn's trans troubles

Obviously one wishes Jeremy Corbyn's new party (Your Party? Jezbollah? Sultana and the Fruitcakes?) well, but already the intersectional tensions are developing.

The trans activist India Willoughby (no relation to Holly, and a different sex) has launched a furious tirade against one of Jezza's few MPs, Adnan Hussain, who suggested that trans women should not be allowed into spaces reserved for biological (ie real) women.

"F*** you, Adnan Hussain," Willoughby shrieked, "I am absolutely a biological woman. So sick of this constant degradation. Imagine if I said you're not a real Brit."

A biological woman, India? Maybe check those chromosomes and get back to me. Anyway, Hussain responded by calling Willoughby a racist.

And so the spat will continue, one suspects, until both disappear in a puff of smoke, leaving nothing but a small stain on the carpet.

New political season.
New star signing.

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‘Parents should be allowed opt-out on screen homework’

With schools increasingly asking pupils to complete work on their devices, campaigners are seeking a pen-and-paper option

Louise Eccles
Education and Early Years Editor

Getting a child to do their homework can be tricky – but it is even more of a nightmare for parents worried that their children are already spending too much time staring at computer screens.

Children as young as five are being set homework that requires them to use programs or apps in the evenings to practice spelling and learn their times tables, or to complete worksheets and essays.

Popular educational technology programs include Times Tables Rock Stars, Spelling Shed, Kahoot, Duolingo, Seneca and Quizlet. Children are being told to, for example, “do 30 minutes’ practice on TT Rock Stars”.

Campaigners and MPs want parents to be able to opt their children out of screen-based homework and ask for them to be given a pen-and-paper alternative, according to campaigners and MPs.

Tomorrow the Conservatives will table an amendment to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill to give parents the statutory right to opt their children out of device-based homework at primary and secondary schools.

Meanwhile, the regional government in Madrid is to ban schools from setting screen-based homework in primary schools from this month and limit the use of computers and tablets at school to a maximum of two hours a week, due to concerns about children’s mental health.

Molly Kingsley, a lawyer and co-founder of Safe Screens, which campaigns against ed-tech in schools and has 65,000 followers on Instagram, supports an opt-out. She said: “Many parents are trying to be very strict at home, limiting iPads and smartphones, and then they are being completely undercut by being told to use these devices.

“Whether it’s watching an interactive video or reading the material online, it introduces a screen at a very unhelpful time during the children’s evening routine. It is not clear to me what it adds to old-fashioned pen and paper, where it is very easy for a parent to watch over the shoulder and to help.

“There is a general consensus, I think, that smartphones and social media have not been good for children, whereas we’re right at the beginning of that conversation for ed-tech.”

Kingsley said she asked that her daughter, 11, not do screen-based homework at primary school, but she will soon be issued with a free iPad at secondary school. “It is very notable that lots of schools seem to pride themselves on the ed-tech offering, holding it out as, you know, ‘This is a great thing that your child will have,’” she said.

Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, said “screens are as addictive as cigarettes”.

The Conservatives will table other amendments this week, which include ensuring secondary school exams remain handwritten and preventing pupils in reception, who are aged four and five, from being required to use tablets or computers for baseline tests.

Trott said: “Every day there is new evidence of the irreversible harm that screens and smartphones are having on our children’s wellbeing and attainment. It doesn’t have to be this way. We can and must do more.”

The amendments build on earlier Conservative proposals to ban smartphones in schools, dismissed by the prime minister as “unnecessary” because most schools already have phone policies.

In Sweden, the government has reversed its policy requiring children to use digital learning tools in schools for children under six, and said “non-analogue learning tools should be greatly restricted” over concerns that screens were harming reading and writing skills.

The actress Sophie Winkleman, who removed her daughters from a prep school because of their policy of giving iPads to pupils from the age of six, supports the call for less ed-tech at home.

She said: “I think an opt-out of screen-based homework would be a godsend to many parents, who observe the agitating effect that screens have on their children after school when they should be winding down.

“But in an ideal world, paper-based learning would make a resurgence both in the classroom and for homework for all children, not just the lucky few whose parents are around to note the worsening moods, the shallower comprehension and the later bedtimes incurred using enervating machines instead of books.

“Parents – and many teachers – can see what a rubbish way this is for their children to learn, but schools are intractable.”

Winkleman, whose daughters are nine and 12, said screens were being “horribly overused in British classrooms by schools that have signed long contracts with ed-tech platforms and can’t retract, even though it’s clear that pupils are not learning nearly as well as they did with books”.

She added: “It’s easy to call ed-tech sceptics Luddites – but have a look at where the Big Tech titans send their kids. Many attend the San Francisco Waldorf School, which has a strict “no screens” policy. The tech use is fiercely specific and moderate and the rest of the school day is spent expanding the mind with the highest forms of strikingly traditional learning – including the memorisation of long poems and learning multiple musical instruments to high levels.”

> **Families trying to be strict on screens at home are being undercut**

65,000

Instagram followers of Safe Screens, which campaigns against ed-tech

POTTERING ABOUT

MARCO PIOVANOTTO/ABACAPRESS

The Harry Potter star Emma Watson, 35, who is studying part-time for a master’s degree at Oxford and has not appeared in a movie since 2019, was in Venice for the last day of its film festival, where she wore a Gucci minidress and Ray-Ban sunglasses

Truants’ families must take classes

Caroline Wheeler
Political Editor

Bridget Phillipson is considering proposals for parents of truanting pupils to undergo speed awareness-style parenting classes to combat spiralling rates of school absence.

The education secretary’s schools white paper this autumn will attempt to restore the relationship between parents and schools that she believes broke down during the Covid lockdowns.

She is understood to be examining a report by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) proposing “attendance awareness courses” modelled on those for speeding drivers, with up to £200 fines for those who refuse to go.

A source close to Phillipson said the proposals were in the “right ball park”, adding: “This is not about victimising parents but we are looking at a tougher message, while also putting more support in place for schools and families.”

Laura Trott, the shadow education secretary, backed the report, saying: “Parents have a duty to ensure their children are in school. When that doesn’t happen, the consequences are serious not just for the child’s future, but for wider society.”

Polling by Whitestone Insight for the CSJ found that 44 per cent of parents of school-age children thought it was “reasonable” for a pupil to miss one school day in ten. Two in five secondary school parents (42 per cent) said “most of what my child gets taught in school is unlikely to help them in later life”.

The CSJ study found that persistent absence and severe absence (missing 50 per cent or more of lessons) had doubled since 2018-19.

Persistently absent pupils were £10,000 worse off by age 28, the study found, and three times as likely to become a young offender within two years of leaving school.

Teenagers prouder than older generation to be British, says poll

Caroline Wheeler
Political Editor

British 16 and 17-year-olds are more patriotic than the public overall, but are indifferent about the monarchy, according to a new poll.

The research for The Sunday Times found that 49 per cent say they are proud of their national identity, while 10 per cent say they are ashamed, a net positive score of 39. Across the population as a whole, 45 per cent are proud while 15 per cent are ashamed, a net score of 30.

There is a stark gender divide. Almost six in ten boys (57 per cent) say they are proud to be British, compared with almost four in ten girls (39 per cent).

Despite their national pride, however, these teenagers are no great fans of the royal family. More than a quarter – 27 per cent – support abolishing the monarchy, while 24 per cent oppose it. Meanwhile, 35 per cent say they neither support nor oppose it, and 15 per cent say they don’t know.

The pollster, More in Common, organised an online focus group with young people, where they spoke of their apathy towards the monarchy.

Jake, 17, from Leeds, said: “I don’t really care for it. I understand it’s very good for bringing money into the country and tourism. I’ve even visited London and the palace myself , but I wouldn’t be bothered if one day it randomly disappeared.”

Siya, 17, from Birmingham, said: “I feel as if they’re put on a pedestal, but at the end of the day they are just people, and I feel like if you’re ever going to aim towards being a fully equal society, then everybody needs to be treated equally.”

In the event of a war, a quarter (24 per cent) of 16 to 17-year-olds say they would be likely to sign up to fight. This increases to 32 per cent among boys, while nearly half of boys (47 per cent) say they would be unlikely to do so.

Among girls, 15 per cent say they would be likely to enlist, compared with nearly two thirds (64 per cent) who would be unlikely to do so.

Luke Tryl, the director of More in Common, said: “Much of this research shows how different the next generation of adults’ experience of childhood has been. Today’s young Britons have come of age through a decade of political turmoil, a pandemic, and a cost-of-living crisis. It’s no surprise they feel like a distinct generation, with different politics and shifting values.

“One example is their view of the monarchy. While most adults support it, just a quarter of teens would oppose abolition, and nearly half say they don’t really mind either way.

“And yet, this group is as proud of the UK as the generations before them. Despite the common belief that patriotism is fading among young people, 16 and 17-year-olds are more likely than adults to feel proud of being British. Their pride is clearly less tied to traditional institutions like the royal family, but it is still strong, and possibly growing.”

In July, the government confirmed plans to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 in time for the next general election, bringing Westminster in line with Holyrood and the Senedd. It will be the biggest change to the franchise since the voting age fell from 21 to 18 in 1969.

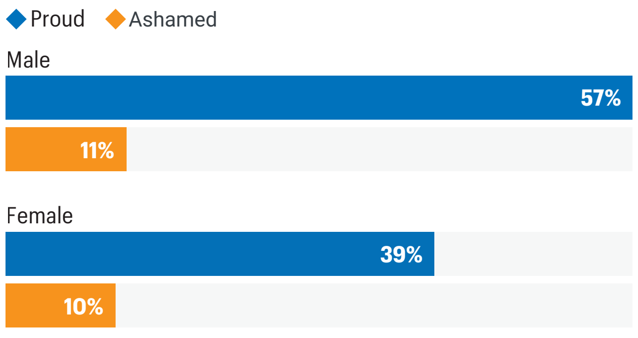
More than one in five in the age group would vote for Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana’s new party at the next election.

The hard-left group, which has the working name of Your Party, would knock six percentage points off Labour’s vote share among the new voters, leaving Sir Keir Starmer’s party on 24 per cent, Nigel Farage’s Reform on 23 per cent and Corbyn’s party on 21 per cent.

Editorial, page 20

HOW PROUD OR ASHAMED ARE YOU TO BE BRITISH?

Most teens are proud to be British, especially boys



Fieldwork dates: 7-28 August 2025, sample size 1,115 Britons aged 16-17 (excludes Northern Ireland)

Source: More in Common

Look up tonight to see ‘blood moon’ eclipse

Ben Spencer Science Editor

Step outside this evening, look east, and – if the skies stay clear – you will see a rare “blood moon”, in which the moon turns a deep, dark red.

In a total lunar eclipse, the Earth will pass directly between the sun and the moon, casting the moon into shadow. As light bends through the Earth’s atmosphere, the blue light is scattered, with only the red light – which has longer wavelength – illuminating the moon’s surface, giving it a reddish or coppery hue. The exact colour depends on how much dust is in the Earth’s atmosphere – the more dust, the redder it looks.

The moon will rise above the horizon at 7.30pm, already in eclipse. The deepest phase is at 7.33pm and it will be over by 7.52pm.

Because it will be low in the sky, the clearest views will be from a hill – or anywhere you can see the eastern horizon without buildings or trees in the way.

The last totala lunar eclipse visible from the UK was in May 2022, but it occurred between 2.32am and 5.10am when all but the most ardent moongazers were tucked up in bed. The next will be in December 2028.

Partial lunar eclipses are more frequent – they were seen in the UK in March this year and in October 2023.

Ed Bloomer, an astronomer at the Royal Observatory Greenwich, said: “The moon is pretty unmistakable in the sky … It’ll be rising towards the east, and head southwards over the course of the night.”

Night sky, page 25

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ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

A bloodless takeover of Taiwan is Xi's goal. Here's how it might go…

After his show of strength in Beijing, the Chinese leader believes if no bullets are fired, the US will have no reason to stand in his way

MARK URBAN

Imagine it is October 2027 and, in the faltering light of early evening, a motorcade carrying officials from Beijing is arriving in the centre of Taipei, capital of Taiwan. Their appearance, to set up a permanent liaison mission, follows a month-long naval and air quarantine of the island by massed Chinese forces.

There have been dogfights in the air and some skirmishes at sea, but the losses have been slight. At this moment of high tension, Taiwan's opposition parties, combining to form a majority in parliament, stage a constitutional coup against the island's pro-western president and invite the People's Republic to send over a team to prevent further "misunderstandings".

The world's stock markets, roiling for weeks since Beijing declared its de facto blockade, start to settle and the US president says he will respect the will of the Taiwanese parliament, pulling back the US fleet. Over time it will become clear that this new legation in Taipei, rather like the liaison office of the central people's government established in Hong Kong after Britain's 1997 handover, will become the real source of power and patronage.

President Xi promises to respect the island's distinctive character, a global crisis is defused and he receives a thunderous reception at the 21st National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. There the papers are circulated to vote him in for an unprecedented fourth term in power.

This scenario for the Chinese takeover of Taiwan may sound unlikely, and it certainly assumes things going very much Xi's way. But its assumptions about China preferring to avoid a large-scale invasion, and preparations to exploit the island's political divisions, are in line with what intelligence and policy chiefs in the countries most concerned expect.

After last week's diplomatic success in Beijing, the Chinese leader may be feeling confident, but the imposition of Beijing's authority on that offshore outpost of democracy is still fraught with uncertainty.

"His big puzzle," argues Philip Shetler-Jones of the Royal United Services Institute (Rusi) think tank, "is how to get Taiwan without bringing China into war with the US, which still has some aces up its sleeve sufficient to make a conflict very dangerous."

The attitude of President Trump, or indeed his successor, will therefore be critical. British ministers have concluded that Trump is not prepared to start a war in defence of Taiwan. Highlighting this perception and what he argued were America's diplomatic blunders, the former foreign secretary William Hague wrote in The Times that Xi "intends Taiwan to drop into the lap of the People's Liberation Army [PLA] without it having to fight".

Concerns about Trump's position have been fed by the recent postponement of a visit to Washington of the Taiwanese defence minister and the president's upbeat comments about striking a trade deal with Xi. To add to Taipei's concerns, leaks from the new National Security Strategy suggest Trump is about to abandon the containment of China as the primary goal of US policy, in favour of homeland defence.

The US administration does not speak with one voice on this, there being China hawks in its ranks. Pete Hegseth, the US defence secretary, has used tougher language than his president, warning in May of devastating regional consequences if the People's Republic tried to force the issue. "The threat China poses is real," he said. "And it could be imminent".

Trump thinks he has an understanding on Taiwan with Xi, claiming the Chinese leader told him, "I will never do it so long as you're president". The danger of piquing Trump's pride is one more reason for China to avoid a spectacular D-Day-style invasion.

Added to the risk of US intervention is the danger of a global economic shock resulting from an interruption to Taiwan's microprocessor exports and the possibility of a humiliating setback for the PLA. All of this makes the "invasion" option unlikely, at least during the next few years.

Taiwan's distance from the mainland, small number of suitable landing beaches and highly built-up coastline would make it a highly uncertain business. It proved too big a challenge even for America's huge mobilised armed forces, when in 1944 they abandoned plans for Operation Causeway, an assault on the then Japanese-held island, that would have required more than 700,000 personnel and taken months to carry out.

Instead of hitting the beach, China's recent operations have emphasised flooding the air and sea space around the island with forces that could isolate it in a crisis while simultaneously waging information warfare designed to convince Taiwan's 23 million people that resistance to reunification with the motherland is futile.

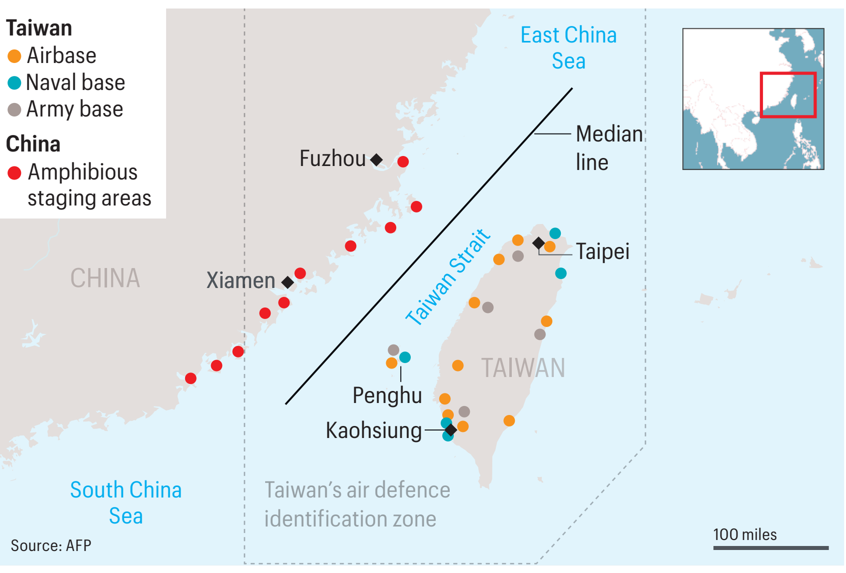
In the Strait Thunder 2025A exercises this year, the PLA rehearsed a three-phase operation: during the first its forces moved into position around the island; the second involved a missile bombardment of key Taiwanese bases; and the third saw mainland forces impose a blockade. The two points of note are that no large-scale troop landings were practised and that the PLA hoped to overawe Taiwanese forces by launching these strikes on their forces.

Evidently there are risks in using a missile blitz, not least that thousands of casualties might harden the islanders' will to resist and trigger some sort of US military intervention. Some analysts therefore suspect that Xi might adopt a less kinetic approach, using a pretext that pro-independence forces were trying to seize power, or to import powerful new weapons from the US, in order to quarantine Taiwan by taking control of the air and sea space around it.

Some regional analysts believe the Chinese coastguard rather than the PLA navy could be used to stop ships at sea for inspection, as a way of managing escalation. Conversely, Beijing might calculate that some use of force might be necessary to prod into action political forces on the island that have long sought to avoid war.

The former US naval intelligence chief Rear Admiral Mike Studeman said in testimony to the US Congress in July that such military pressure could be combined with a move by pro-Beijing parties in Taiwan. He noted that "decades of PRC [People's Republic of China] political warfare machinations had created vulnerabilities inside Taiwan that the PRC wouldn't hesitate to exploit during an attempted takeover".

As for the timing of this, Professor Zhang Weiwei, a Chinese academic, caused a stir in May when he speculated that elections due on the island at the start of 2028 would not happen. "The time is ripe to solve the Taiwan question," he told students at Fudan University, which is closely aligned with the communist leadership. "Taiwan will not have



Source: AFP

> His puzzle is how to win but still avoid war with the US

Arrest warrant for killing of Marie Colvin rattles gates of Assad's gilded Moscow cage

Matthew Campbell

Russia keeps the address deliberately blurred, but Bashar al-Assad, the deposed Syrian despot and accused war criminal, is living in gilded limbo in Moscow, apparently dividing his time between a luxury Moscow tower block and a sumptuous mansion behind barbed wire in the city's exclusive western "dacha belt".

His host, President Putin, another wanted war criminal, granted him sanctuary on "humanitarian grounds" when he fled his country in December last year with Asma, his London-born wife, and their three children, as rebels closed in on the Syrian capital.

But now the French judicial authorities have rattled the gates of their Russian hideaway. On Tuesday, magistrates issued arrest warrants for Assad, his younger brother Maher, and five other former henchmen over the artillery strike that killed Marie Colvin, the intrepid foreign correspondent for The Sunday Times, and Rémi Ochlik, a French photographer, in the Syrian city of Homs in 2012.

Moscow scoffs at European warrants and the values they embody and is unlikely to give up the cosseted Syrians, the latest members of a rough menagerie of unsavoury ex-heads of state and former officials under Kremlin protection. While Europe has branded Assad a butcher who presided over the gassing, torture and murder of tens of thousands of his countrymen, Putin has rolled out a red carpet for a family who, perhaps guessing long ago that they might need a Russian bolthole, invested more than $40 million in luxury Moscow tower blocks with discreet elevators and private security just a short drive from the dacha retreat.

Assad's eldest son, Hafez, studied mathematics at Moscow's state university while living in one of the family's 19 opulent flats in "Moscow City", a development that began in the early 1990s and is a forest of glass-and-steel spires on the Moskva River, a self-contained district of offices, hotels, flats and shopping centres. Assad's psychotic younger brother Maher, who was tasked with regime "dirty work" – and fled Damascus with the rest of the family – is rumoured to occupy another of the family flats: a Kurdish politician recently posted a video online showing a man she identified as Maher dining in a plush shisha café in one of the malls.

But while the family might feel relatively secure under Putin's protection, the arrest warrants resulting from a long-running French judicial investigation are an unwelcome reminder of how the world beyond Moscow has shrunk for them. Britain has frozen more than £160 million in assets linked to former Syrian regime figures and French and Spanish courts have seized Assad properties worth more than $810 million.

Asma al-Assad, 50, a British citizen, was diagnosed with myeloid leukemia in May last year. But the British authorities have said she is "not welcome" should she seek treatment in London, the longstanding destination of choice for well-heeled patients from the Middle East; and her 59-year-old husband is unable to go anywhere in Europe without the risk of being put in handcuffs.

"These French warrants have real-world effects," said Paul Conroy, a photographer who was seriously injured while accompanying Colvin for The Sunday Times in Homs. He remembers being interviewed years ago by a French investigating magistrate and was "astonished" to receive an email on Tuesday from a lawyer announcing the seven arrest warrants for Assad and his cronies.

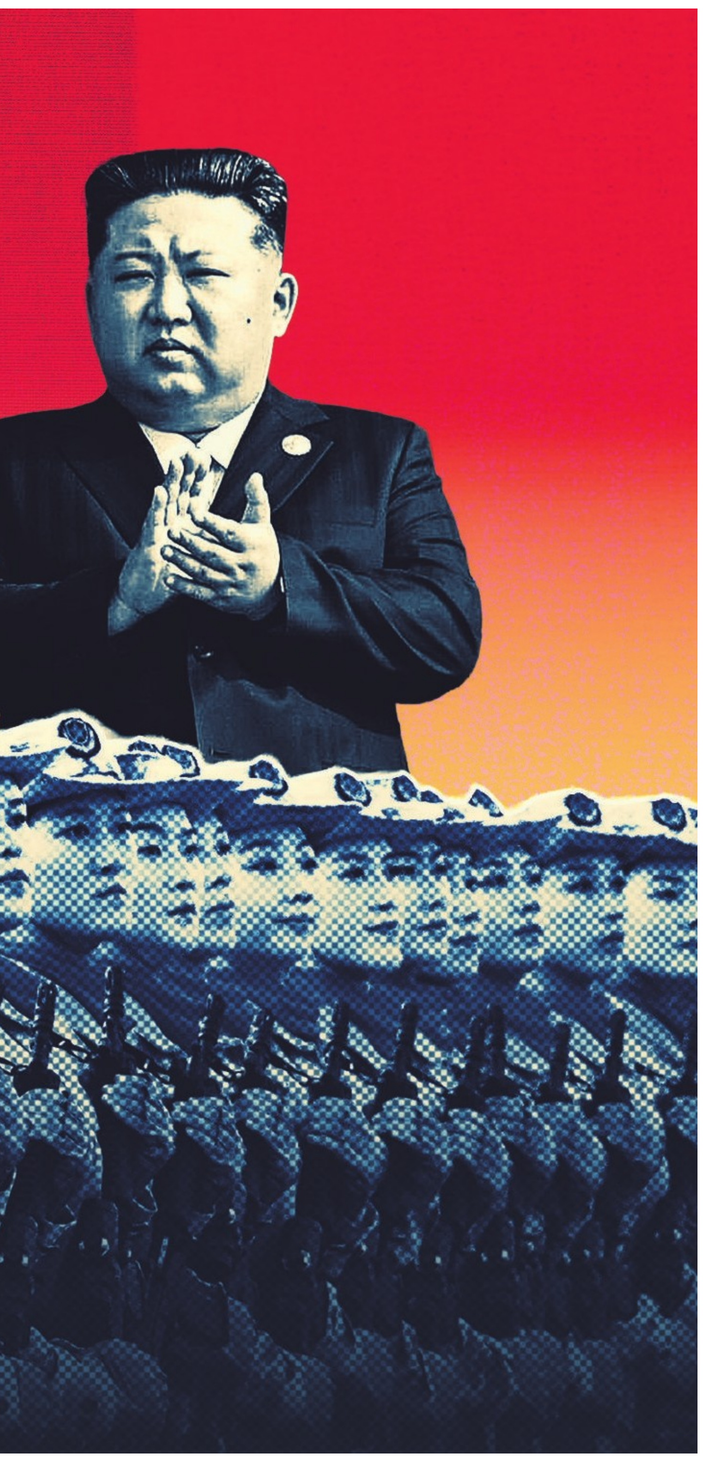
"I'm obviously delighted and Marie's family will be too," he added over the phone from Kramatorsk in Ukraine: in spite of nearly losing his leg in Homs, he has continued reporting from the world's hotspots and is chronicling Russia's indiscriminate shelling of civilians. "It may be a slow burn," he said of the legal process. "But some day what they [the Assad regime] did will catch up with them. Nobody ever thought [Radovan] Karadzic and [Ratko] Mladic would be arrested," he added, referring to Serbian war criminals of the 1990s Balkan conflict. After long being thought untouchable they are now serving life sentences.

The killing of Colvin, 56, was no accident.

In a case brought by her

IVOR PRICKETT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Marie Colvin was killed in an artillery strike in Syria in 2012



President Xi was flanked by President Putin and Kim Jong-un at last week's military parade in Beijing

another election, right? Everything is ready."

Following the 2024 election, President Lai Ching-te leads a minority administration. While opposition parties support keeping the island's democratic status quo, they could combine in time of crisis to cause Lai significant problems, accepting a closer mainland role in their affairs.

Political divisions have historically undermined the island's defence preparations but not everything is going Xi's way. During the past 18 months defence spending has gone up and the period of national service increased from a token four months to one year.

Although most Taiwanese questioned in polls express their willingness to defend the island, it is also the majority view that they will end up unified with China. Thus, China's political messaging tends to emphasise the inevitability of union and the small chance of Taiwan getting help. Uncertainty over Trump's position is therefore useful for Beijing.

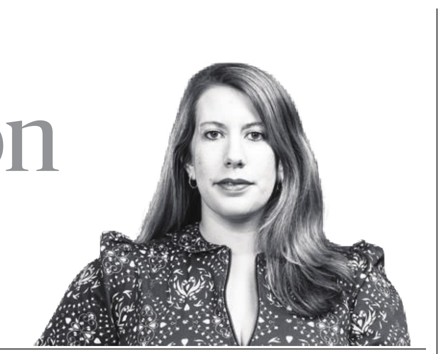
Xi has use an array of options and timescales to bring Taiwan into the People's Republic. If he eschews a large-scale assault that would make it easier for America to look the other way. Rusi's Shetler-Jones, notes that "the US does not seem to have a game plan for a unification process that does not involve a war".

Last week's parade in Beijing has helped China's leader in two ways as he considers how to take Taiwan: the show of military might could feed the view on the island that there's no point fighting; and he will have been reassured that many countries will not want to jeopardise their relations with the People's Republic if he does make his move.

After the smiles and bows at the Palace, don't expect this monarchical president to be pulling his punches with Britain

Katy Balls

Washington Insider



There is a trick that seasoned Washington journalists have up their sleeve when they are running out of time in an interview with President Trump and want to keep him talking: ask about the royal family.

Few subjects animate the president more than his love of the monarchy, which he inherited from his mother – a Scot from the Outer Hebrides. "He grew up with his mother telling him all about them," explains an acquaintance. Trump often talks about how one of his first memories is of watching his mother enthralled by Queen Elizabeth's 1953 coronation.

As Trump put it a month after his state visit to the UK in his first term: "It was the Queen who I was most impressed with!" (In the same series of tweets, he explained which non-royal attendees he was less impressed with – starting with Theresa May.)

His warmth towards Britain extends to the King and is one reason why the government took the unprecedented step of offering a second state visit – its best tool in trying to keep the White House on side. For some it was all a bit quick. After all, if you throw a second state visit so early on, what's the plan to keep the administration sweet for the remaining three years?

Yet as the visit looms in just over a week, it is having the desired effect in Washington. "Everyone is very excited," says an administration figure. White House staff are finding white tie dress for the state banquet – only a handful have the black tailcoat and other requirements.

Trump has been discussing the trip with recent visitors to the Oval Office. When Nigel Farage sat down with the president on Wednesday they talked at length about the venue, Windsor Castle, even if Farage will not get to see it this time, having been left off the guest list. "The government is running scared," says a Reform figure of the apparent snub.

On the first visit, Trump stayed at Buckingham Palace, now closed for refurbishments. At Windsor Castle, he is expected to visit St George's Chapel to pay his respects to the late Queen at her resting place.

Many organisers are involved but Trump's ambassador to the UK, Warren Stephens, is leading the charge along with Lord Mandelson and Varun Chandra, Sir Keir Starmer's business adviser, on the UK side. Stephens and Mandelson, as ambassador, worked closely to agree the UK-US trade deal and have continued that relationship for the state visit.

The British side hope a visit-related charm offensive will help cement the signing of a new technology deal and future collaboration. As Mandelson puts it, the trip will herald "the next chapter of transatlantic success". The Americans see two priorities: showing respect for the monarchy and the pursuit of mutually beneficial business agreements.

But these days, what your average Republican or administration figure tends to think will benefit Britain can often be rather different from the Labour government's view.

Maga's Anglophilia has been on full show over the summer, first with Trump at his golf course in Turnberry in Scotland, then JD Vance in the Cotswolds. (The vice-president won't be returning for the state visit – at no time can both he and Trump be absent from US soil.) In the wake of all this it has become evident how concerned administration figures are with what is happening in the UK.

Trumpworld tends to think of the UK as a land of mass immigration, censorship and high crime. "It's like the Premier League. If you love the Premier League you will be able to say what has gone wrong with it," says a Washington insider who is privy to thinking on both sides of the pond.

What is more, there is no shortage of Britons keen to tell the administration that things are not rosy. Just last week, Farage appeared before Congress and likened free speech in the UK to North Korea. Further concerns about the state of the country were raised that night in front of senior members of the administration when they descended on a Washington private member's club to celebrate the launch of GB News in America.

> The first day will be the easiest: it will be pomp and pictures

Speaking at the event, Trump's spokeswoman, Karoline Leavitt, celebrated the arrival of the right-leaning broadcaster: "You're going to be bringing a lot more common sense to the great people of the United Kingdom and sharing in the values that this administration holds dear."

She went on to list these: "Free speech, no men in women's sports. Men cannot be women. Women cannot be men. Secure borders. We don't want illegal aliens invading our countries. We want to protect the integrity and the democracy and the culture that make our countries two of the greatest countries in the history of the world."

The next day, speaking at the National Conservatism Conference (NatCon DC), Steve Bannon bemoaned the state of Britain. He told attendees that England was on the brink of a "civil war".

"Every US conservative who follows the UK is concerned about these issues," says Nile Gardiner, director of the Margaret Thatcher Centre for Freedom at the Heritage Foundation, which has close links to the administration.

Trump has long found merit in Starmer on the grounds that while they may not share much in ideology, he is a winner. Yet the prime minister's current woes and the rise of Farage and Reform may change that calculation. "The upshot is, they care," says one British official looking for the positives. "If you had a party there [in Washington] trashing the Spanish government, no one from the White House would go – they wouldn't care enough."

While both sides are keen for Trump's visit to be a celebration and go without a hiccup, those involved admit there is an elephant in the room. "Everyone is going to be on very good behaviour for the state visit," insists one plugged-in Maga figure. Organisers see next Wednesday, the first full day – largely filled with royal engagements – as the easiest, given that it will largely be pomp and pictures. Then the next day is about government business, probably with a press conference. Of course flare-ups are possible before that: Trump has a habit of taking questions from the press several times a day as well as firing off missives on Truth Social, his social media platform.

In 2019, as foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt had the job of greeting Trump from the plane. Air Force One landed but Trump took some time to get off. Hunt began to worry. Had something bad happened? Then there was relief – he was simply busy tweeting that Sir Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, was "a stone cold loser who should focus on crime in London, not me".

If the visit goes to plan, longer-term questions remain for the special relationship. In a week when Trump has voiced frustration at pictures of President Putin, President Xi and Narendra Modi on parade together in Beijing, there is an extra incentive in the White House to keep western allies close.

What's more, this administration is more interventionist when it comes to those they see as sharing common ground – they want to get them to where they need to be to count as strong allies. "All of this will be a factor post-state visit," predicts one Washington figure.

And what in the eyes of Trumpworld would make the UK a stronger ally? This demands more than backing freedom of speech and the tech giants who benefit from it. "Maga is built on despising virtue signalling, we think virtue signalling has allowed the takeover of your country by Islam," says one Maga figure.

Starmer's move towards recognising Palestinian statehood, hours after seeing Trump at Turnberry, led to some grumblings on the Republican side. However, the US is more critical of France – for now, at least. On Friday, Republicans began to ask questions about the appointment of Shabana Mahmood as home secretary on the grounds that she could be too pro-Palestine.

Then there's the economy. When MPs recently visited Washington as part of a trade delegation, several members of Congress raised concerns about the state of the public finances. Stephens, less than six months in to his post as US ambassador, has spoken about the importance of cheaper energy to power an economic boom and the AI revolution that animates many in No 10. Here, Stephens has an ally in Mandelson. Last week the British ambassador met Chris Wright, the US energy secretary, for lunch. The administration wants the UK to be strong financially – in part because it will then be a stronger ally for the US.

For all of the choreography, the risks of the state visit are obvious: Trump's affection for Britain can be as volatile as it is genuine. His mother's tales of the Queen made him a lifelong monarchist, but his social media fusillades against London's mayor during the last visit showed how quickly the mood can sour.

Yet the harder part may come after the visit, when the big questions remain. It's these issues that are likely to dominate in the years that follow. For Downing Street, the lesson is clear: Trump's Anglophilia cuts both ways.

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

President Trump and the Queen at Windsor Castle during his previous state visit in 2018

sister, Cat, a federal court in America ruled in 2019 that Colvin, an American citizen, and the few other journalists who were smuggled by rebels though an underground tunnel into the beleaguered Baba Amr district of Homs had been deliberately targeted to prevent them exposing the barbarity of a regime pulverising civilian districts with artillery fire. Detailed testimony exposed how Assad's soldiers were ordered to target a makeshift media centre where the journalists were staying.

One of the French arrest warrants is for Rafiq Mahmoud Shahadah, the Homs former head of security. He hosted a celebration in his office after the attack in which he said: "Marie Colvin was a dog and now she's dead." A few days later, another of the officers involved in the killing received his reward: a luxury Hyundai Genesis sedan car from Maher al-Assad. As former commander of the Syrian army's fourth division, Maher was the regime's hardline enforcer accused by rights groups of ordering "shoot-to-kill" crackdowns, torture and suspected chemical attacks.

Colvin, who grew up in Oyster Bay on Long Island, New York, and graduated from Yale University, made a career out of going where civilians were trapped and governments tried to hide evidence. A film, *A Private War*, would later introduce her to those who had somehow missed her reporting for The Sunday Times over nearly three decades from hotspots such as Chechnya, Iraq and Libya. In 1999, she stayed in a UN compound with 1,500 women and children in East Timor until their evacuation was secured.

> These warrants have real-world effects for Assad

Colvin lost her left eye to shrapnel in Sri Lanka in 2001 but kept filing, her black eye patch becoming an emblem of courage. The mortar round that took her life was evidence of the extremes to which a ruthless government would go to silence independent eyewitness journalists such as Colvin, wrote Lindsey Hilsum, her friend and fellow foreign correspondent, in her biography, *In Extremis*.

"It's clear the journalists were targeted because they were telling the truth about the regime's attacks on civilians in this part of Homs," she said in an interview. On the evening before Colvin was killed, she had conducted an interview on American television, describing scenes she had just witnessed in a makeshift clinic where children were among the casualties, including a baby that had died in front of her. "That was a fatal mistake, the Syrians were able to trace the satellite signal," Hilsum said.

Colvin would have loved nothing more than to cover the revolution in Syria, which today is staggering into a fraught transition, half-rebuilt and half-broken, while a provisional government has taken shape combining some of the rival fiefdoms. When Hilsum visited Baba Amr, its people were still talking about Colvin. "They adored her: the way they saw it was that she had sacrificed her life for them."

Beyond Syria, Colvin "would have been beside herself about not getting into Gaza", added her friend. Israel has refused to allow journalists into the war-ravaged territory.

Hilsum believes that while Assad has not moved from his hideout, the law has come closer, challenging the presumption that a leader who carried out chemical attacks and starved cities can retire to a Moscow bolthole with impunity for the rest of his life. "As he sits in Moscow under the protection of a fellow war criminal, he might quite like the idea of travelling somewhere, particularly considering the condition of his wife. But he can't. And that's something."

Editorial, page 20

French anaesthetist accused of poisoning 30 patients

Peter Conradi
Europe Editor

On the morning of January 11, 2017, Sandra Simard was wheeled into the operating theatre of the Saint-Vincent Clinic in Besançon, in eastern France, for routine back surgery.

The 36-year-old patient "presented no particular anaesthetic risk", according to Anne-Sophie Balon-Dole, the anaesthetist who was treating her.

Then, without warning, in the middle of the procedure, Simard's heart failed. A fellow anaesthetist, Frédéric Péchier, rushed to administer an injection of calcium gluconate that would save her life.

For five days Simard lay in a coma. Although she has since recovered, she continues to suffer from life-changing brain injuries.

Péchier may not have been the medical hero he seemed, however. A lethal dose of potassium – one hundred times higher than the norm – was later found in one of the bags feeding Simard's intravenous drip.

Prosecutors allege the bag had been contaminated by Péchier, who they claim deliberately provoked the crisis in order to impress his colleagues with his medical prowess at saving the patient.

Nor was Simard his only alleged victim. Péchier, who was arrested shortly after the botched operation, goes on trial tomorrow, accused of intentionally poisoning a total of 30 child and adult patients, 12 of whom could not be resuscitated and then died.

The incidents are alleged to have taken place between 2008 and 2017 at the Saint-Vincent Clinic and another hospital in the same city, the Franche-Comte Polyclinic, at which he spent six months in 2009.

The oldest victim was Edith Bongaim, 89, who died during a routine leg operation in 2015. The youngest a four-year-old boy, named only as Teddy, who suffered two cardiac arrests during tonsil surgery in February 2016 that have been blamed on substances allegedly put into his IV drip by Péchier. The boy survived but still suffers from neurological disorders.

Péchier, a father of three who has been banned from practicing medicine, faces life imprisonment if convicted. He has denied all of the charges.

"I am accused of heinous crimes that I did not commit," he said when was arrested in 2017 and accused of the first seven of the poisonings. He was indicted over another 17 new cases in May 2019 and six more in March 2023. "Daring to call Dr. Péchier a 'serial killer' is irresponsible," said his lawyer, Randall Schwerdorffer.

Simard, who heads an association of those affected by the case, plans to be sitting in the courtroom a few feet away from the man she believes tried to kill her.

"There are still a lot of people who don't know the details of the case and believe he's innocent. You can't blame them. At first, I wasn't sure either. But over time, I learnt about all the evidence against Dr Péchier," she told L'Est Républicain, the region's newspaper.

Also present at the court in Doubs, near Besançon, will be Amandine Iehlen, whose 53-year-old father, Damien, died of cardiac arrest in 2008 while having a kidney removed. "I've been waiting for this for 17 years," she said. "If I can hold out psychologically and physically, I'll be there every day."

A post-mortem examination revealed her father had been injected with a massive overdose of lidocaine, a local anaesthetic.

Péchier's trial is due to last until December.

Three deaths in a fortnight at 'devastating human rights violation' Rikers

Louise Callaghan New York

As the bus rolls over the bridge to Rikers Island, everyone stops talking. A nervous quiet takes hold as the East River stretches out below, the razor wire fences and squat cement buildings of New York's most notorious prison ahead.

Osvaldo sits near the front. He just got out a few days ago, and not for the first time. He is taking the bus back to pick up the belongings he had when he was arrested for "boosting" – professional shoplifting – a few months ago. Dark, thick eyebrows hang over eyes that stare straight ahead. Osvaldo was homeless before and he's homeless now, spending the day going back to prison to pick up a plastic bag with a dirty pair of trainers inside.

"That place, it's just …" He trails off. "I don't know, man. I been a lot of places, ain't been nowhere like that."

There are many names for Rikers. Some prisoners call it Gladiator School, for the fight clubs that have proliferated inside over the years, sometimes ignored by the guards, at times run by them. Others have called it Torture Island. In the penal colony, which sits between Queens and the Bronx, the summers are baking hot, the winters freezing and the mentally ill – or just anyone who annoys a guard – can be locked up for 24 hours a day until they really do go mad.

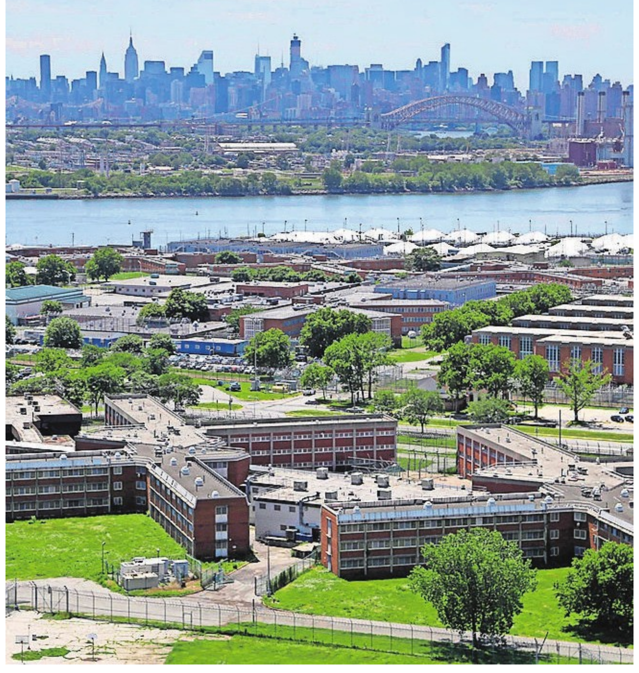
Most of the people inside have not been convicted. Of the roughly 7,000 detainees in Rikers today, about 85 per cent are being held in pre-trial detention – most of them too poor to post bail or hire a lawyer. Some never leave. At least 11 people have died on Rikers this year, three in the past fortnight.

"You come in, you might not come home. And that's the scariest thing for anyone," said Vidal Guzman, 34, who was first imprisoned in Rikers as a 16-year-old and now runs America on Trial, a social justice organisation.

Rikers, said Mary Lynne Werlwas, director of the Prisoner's Rights Project at the Legal Aid Society, was "one of the United States' most devastating human rights violations".

Six years ago, a federal judge ruled that the conditions were so brutal, and city officials' failure to address them so complete, that Rikers had to be closed by 2027. But prison populations keep rising and the construction of new facilities keeps being delayed.

SETH WENIG/AP



At least 11 people have died at Rikers Island this year. Most of its 7,000 inmates have not been convicted of a crime

Experts say Rikers is likely to stay open for years to come.

The history of this dismal place goes back almost 100 years. In 1932, city officials opened a jail on the island, which was a landfill site covered with coal ash and rubbish that at night would spark up into fire "like a forest of Christmas trees", according to one warden.

In the decades since, the rapper Tupac Shakur, Sid Vicious and David Berkowitz, the serial killer known as "Son of Sam" served time here.

Most of the detainees, though, are poor and black or brown. Black Americans make up about 14 per cent of the US population, but nearly half the jail population.

At Rikers, said five former inmates, they live in hell. In the summer, detainees gasp for air at the gaps under locked doors. Only about half the units have air conditioning. Eleven years ago, Jerome Murdough, a homeless veteran, died in his cell during a 37C heatwave. An official said he had been "basically baked to death". Three years ago, the water cut out in two of the buildings and prisoners had to relieve themselves into plastic bags.

According to a 2021 analysis by the city, it costs about half a million dollars a year to keep each prisoner at Rikers. New York city jails have one of the highest staffing-to-prisoner ratios almost anywhere in the country – almost 1:1. Yet guards – nearly half of them women – are constantly accused of failing to do their job and of persecuting inmates. Guards say they do their best in dangerous, difficult circumstances.

Justyna Rzewinski spent nine months as the clinical supervisor on a mental health unit on Rikers before she quit last year. She expected to be treating detainees with serious illnesses. Instead, she found that guards were using the secure mental health units as cells to dump "problem" prisoners, locking them up for 24 hours a day and leaving them there for weeks or months, a practice known as "deadlocking". She said officers didn't document it "because this was against protocol".

The Department of Corrections and the prison guard's union did not respond to requests for comment. The department has previously expressed condolences for deaths at Rikers, calling each a tragedy and pledging investigations into the circumstances.

The new gilets jaunes' cure for France's woes: block everything

Appalled by President Macron's prescription for a debt-crippled nation, the Bloquons Tout movement plans this week to shut it all down

Peter Conradi Morbecque

Like many of his compatriots, Julien Marissiaux, a website designer from northern France, has had enough: of rising prices and taxes, worsening public services and, above all, what he sees as a self-serving political class topped by President Emmanuel Macron that has lost touch with the people.

"The whole system is rotten to the core," he told me last week as we sat in the co-operative café he set up eight years ago in an abandoned building in Morbecque, a town of 2,500 people near the Belgian border. "The overwhelming majority of the French people do not feel they are being represented any more."

Rather than just grumble, Marissiaux, 43, is determined to do something to change the system – or at least to have a try. The loquacious father of two is among the instigators of a day of action that aims to bring France to a halt on Wednesday, involving everything from strikes and protests to consumer boycotts, named *Bloquons Tout* (Let's block everything).

"Our strategy is to create a hydra, a multi-headed hydra, so you can't simply cut off its head," Marissiaux said, explaining the lack of a single leader of the movement, *Les Essentiels* (the Essentials).

Their inspiration is Coluche, the late comedian turned social activist, whose red clown's nose may become the symbol of the movement – just as the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) gave their name to the last big social upheaval to shake up France in 2018 during the early part of Macron's first term.

The action, planned for countless towns and cities, is unlikely to provide comic relief for the president, however. It comes in a week expected to begin with the ousting of François Bayrou – the fourth prime minister since the start of 2024 – with both the left and the far right planning to join forces to defeat the 74-year-old in a parliamentary vote.

The immediate cause of Bayrou's woes is economic: more specifically, resistance to his plans for €44 billion in spending cuts to rein in the public finances after more than half a century in which the French state has consistently failed to balance the books.

"For months France has been discovering the situation that I have been highlighting for years: that it is drowning in debt," the prime minister declared last week in one of a series of radio and television interviews intended to hammer home his message.

More fundamental, however, is an underlying national malaise that can seem inexplicable to outsiders but which has undoubtedly gathered pace under Macron, especially during the upheavals of the Covid lockdowns and subsequent inflation, followed by the geopolitical uncertainty of war in Ukraine and the return of President Trump. Call it the "French Paradox".

For the more than 100 million people or so who visit France each year – more than any other nation – the country has long been synonymous with glorious weather and scenery, good food and wine, and the best high-speed rail network in Europe.

Long vying with the UK to be the sixth-largest economy in the world, it is also known for its dominance of the global fashion industry, network of nuclear power stations and prowess in cars and aeronautics. Macron's attempts to turn France into "*la start-up nation*'', though widely mocked by critics, have also borne some fruit, helping encourage banks and other companies to Paris from London.

Many of the French themselves appear to see their country differently, however, with a traditional national grumpiness giving way to what one recent poll described as "a collective depression".

About 66 per cent of the people questioned by the pollsters Viavoice believe their country is in decline, especially its health-care and education systems and its welfare state – all of which were once the envy of its neighbours. And that was even before the current bout of turbulence.

"To understand this collective depression, it is difficult to refer solely to an accumulation of individual difficulties, or to the economic and social constraints weighing on France," the study's authors concluded. It could be better explained instead by a "feeling of lost identity".

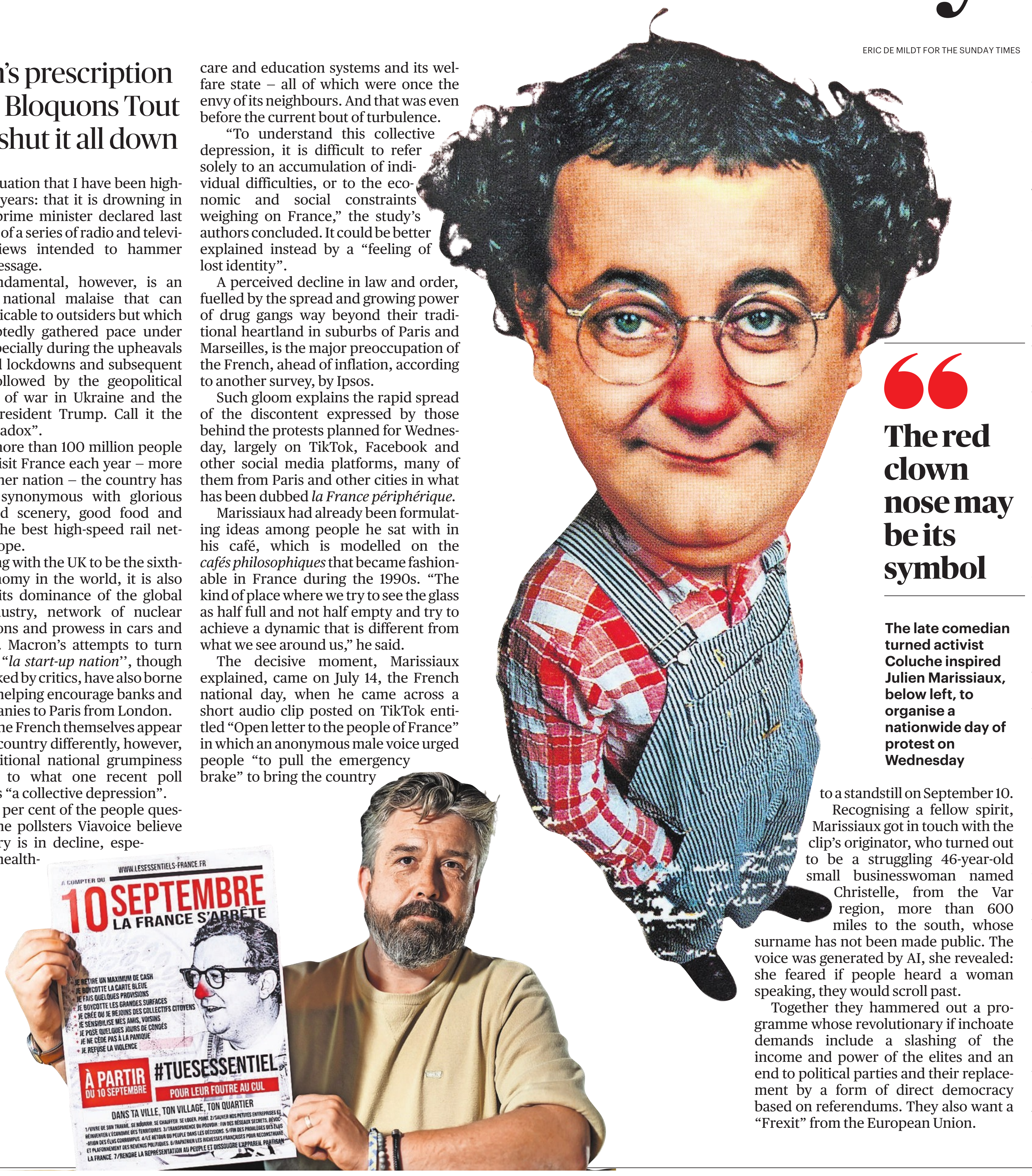
A perceived decline in law and order, fuelled by the spread and growing power of drug gangs way beyond their traditional heartland in suburbs of Paris and Marseilles, is the major preoccupation of the French, ahead of inflation, according to another survey, by Ipsos.

Such gloom explains the rapid spread of the discontent expressed by those behind the protests planned for Wednesday, largely on TikTok, Facebook and other social media platforms, many of them from Paris and other cities in what has been dubbed *la France périphérique*.

Marissiaux had already been formulating ideas among people he sat with in his café, which is modelled on the *cafés philosophiques* that became fashionable in France during the 1990s. "The kind of place where we try to see the glass as half full and not half empty and try to achieve a dynamic that is different from what we see around us," he said.

The decisive moment, Marissiaux explained, came on July 14, the French national day, when he came across a short audio clip posted on TikTok entitled "Open letter to the people of France" in which an anonymous male voice urged people "to pull the emergency brake" to bring the country to a standstill on September 10.

ERIC DE MILDT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES


WWW.LESESSENTIELS-FRANCE.FR
À COMPTER DU
10 SEPTEMBRE
LA FRANCE S'ARRÊTE
JE RETIRE UN MAXIMUM DE CASH
JE BOYCOTTE LA CARTE BLEUE
JE FAIS QUELQUES PROVISIONS
JE BOYCOTTE LES GRANDES SURFACES
JE CRÉE OU JE REJOINS DES COLLECTIFS CITOYENS
JE SENSIBILISE MES AMIS, VOISINS
JE POSE QUELQUES JOURS DE CONGÉS
JE NE CÈDE PAS À LA PANIQUE
JE REFUSE LA VIOLENCE
À PARTIR DU 10 SEPTEMBRE
#TUESESSENTIEL
POUR LEUR FOUTRE AU CUL
DANS TA VILLE, TON VILLAGE, TON QUARTIER

The late comedian turned activist Coluche inspired Julien Marissiaux, below left, to organise a nationwide day of protest on Wednesday

> **The red clown nose may be its symbol**

Recognising a fellow spirit, Marissiaux got in touch with the clip's originator, who turned out to be a struggling 46-year-old small businesswoman named Christelle, from the Var region, more than 600 miles to the south, whose surname has not been made public. The voice was generated by AI, she revealed: she feared if people heard a woman speaking, they would scroll past.

Together they hammered out a programme whose revolutionary if inchoate demands include a slashing of the income and power of the elites and an end to political parties and their replacement by a form of direct democracy based on referendums. They also want a "Frexit" from the European Union.

Their movement got a boost on July 15, when Bayrou announced his programme of spending cuts, which sparked particular outrage by calling for the abolition of two of France's 11 annual public holidays. "I don't watch TV, I didn't even know he was going to announce his budget the next day," Christelle told a French magazine that tracked her down.

She and Marissiaux aim to achieve their goals not by taking to the streets but rather by locking themselves down at home, drawing out large amounts of cash and boycotting debit cards and supermarkets in favour of small shops.

Others that have jumped on their bandwagon have a more traditional vision of how to proceed. The planned actions of another nebulous group, Indignons-Nous (Let's get outraged), include blocking railway stations, refineries and major roads and occupying roundabouts – which will be more visible and more immediately disruptive. Marissiaux and his allies will not be joining them.

Memories of the *gilets jaunes* movement remain fresh on both sides of the French barricades. It, too, began on social media, as a grassroots protest against a planned hike in the tax on diesel, but quickly grew into a broader societal revolt that caused major disruption from November 2018 until well into the following spring – and only petered out after concessions by the government that cost several billion pounds.

Who will actually be running France by then is also not clear, since Bayrou looks set to be defeated in tomorrow's vote. Macron could then potentially dissolve parliament, though this would likely be a last resort. He is instead thought to be considering asking the Socialists, under Olivier Faure, 57, to attempt to form a government that might scrape a narrow majority with the help of Macron's own centrist Renaissance party and some centre-right Republicans.

But they too will be confronted with the same grim economic reality as Bayrou – and by the need to tackle the public finances. At 5.8 per cent of GDP, France's budget deficit is the third biggest in the EU, while the country's accumulated debt is surpassed only by that of Greece and Italy – pushing up its borrowing costs on the international markets.

Despite likely attempts to raise the burden on the corporate sector and the rich, a left-leaning prime minister will find, like Bayrou, that some cuts will be unavoidable. France's collective depression may not be as paradoxical as it appears.

Culture, Books, page 22

Farage of the fjords? Anti-migrant firebrand seeks to topple Norway's steady-as-you-go PM

John Jo Devlin Oslo
Peter Conradi

Although long derided for his aloof manner and wooden communication style, Jonas Gahr Store has portrayed himself as a steady pair of hands, promising safety, stability and economic responsibility for energy-rich Norway.

The Labour prime minister is facing a serious challenge in tomorrow's election, however, from Sylvi Listhaug, a right-wing firebrand with a history of provocative comments and stunts that have included diving into the Mediterranean to "experience" the plight of refugees.

The result appears too close to call after Store staged a remarkable comeback in recent months, with support for Labour surging from 17 per cent last Christmas to 27 per cent, putting it six points ahead of Listhaug's Progress party. The Conservatives, her likely ally, are on 15 per cent.

"The fundamental difference between us and Labour is simple," Listhaug told The Sunday Times last week. "We trust people. Labour believes politicians and bureaucrats know best. We want to give individuals and families more freedom to make their own decisions."

Listhaug also deplored what she called the "heavy burden" placed on entrepreneurs and business owners, accusing Store of being out of touch. Her party wants to cut taxes, which are among the highest in Europe and include one on wealth. A decision by Labour after coming to power in 2021 to raise the top rate of wealth tax from 0.85 per cent to 1.1 per cent, as well as increasing the tax on dividends, has been blamed for an exodus of as many as 50 of the country's richest citizens, many of them to Switzerland.

"Labour wants to take more and more of people's hard-earned money and use it for their own political projects," Listhaug added. "Ordinary people are tired of this. They want to keep more of their own money and decide for themselves how to use it. I think that Jonas Gahr Store is out of touch. He talks about ordinary people, but he doesn't truly seem to understand their struggles with rising prices."

Relations with the European Union, of which Norway is not a member, are also an important dividing line between the two rivals. Norway is part of the European Economic Area, which allows freedom of movement, but negotiates customs and trade relations with Brussels – which has become harder recently.

"Brexit has made everything a bit more difficult, the EU is no longer so fond of cherry-picking," said Kjetil Alstadheim, political editor of Aftenposten, a Norwegian broadsheet. Tariffs imposed by Donald Trump have hit Norway harder than the EU, prompting senior members not just of Labour but also of the Conservatives to argue it is increasingly harmful for their country to remain outside the EU.

Sylvi Listhaug deplores the "heavy burden" of taxes

> **She has railed against the 'tyranny of goodness'**

By contrast, Progress wants as little to do with Brussels as possible. Listhaug has called for Norway to stop selling its copious supply of cheap energy into the European market even though it earns Norway billions of pounds.

Tensions over the EU came to a head at the end of January when Store's junior coalition partner, the Centre party, walked out of the government in a row over the adoption of the EU's clean energy package.

Labour argued for the adoption of at least some of the directives in the name of national security, though this did not convince the Centre party, which draws much of its support from farmers, and is adamant that the new rules would weaken national sovereignty and drive up energy prices.

Store managed to push the measure through with the help of other smaller parties, but said recently that, if returned to power, he will not implement the remaining five parts of the package.

Whoever wins the election, a vote on EU membership is unlikely in the next few years. Norway has had two referendums on joining the bloc – in 1972 and in 1994 – and on both occasions has voted to stay out.

Store, a multimillionaire who inherited wealth from the sale in the 1970s of Jotul, his family's stove and fireplace company, has ascended smoothly through the ranks of the Labour party, becoming its leader in 2014.

By contrast, Listhaug's career has been marked by controversy since her first stint in frontline Norwegian politics in 2013, when Progress became a junior partner in a government led by the Conservatives, at the time the dominant force on the right.

Promoted in 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis, to a new immigration and integration post, she railed against the "tyranny of goodness" gripping Norwegian society.

It was then that she made political waves with her dip in the Mediterranean, floating for a few minutes off the coast of the island of Lesbos in a bright orange rescue suit before being hauled back on board a waiting Norwegian rescue boat.

The stunt was widely ridiculed for being insensitive and ridiculous and mocked on social media, but Listhaug stood by her action.

"It was an experience to see how our Norwegian heroes on board carry out their job of saving human lives. I am proud of their efforts," she said.

NEWS REVIEW

DISTRESS SIGNAL

St George's flags are being flown from lampposts and bridges across England. *Matthew Syed* travels to Epping, the centre of recent protests about migrant hotels, to discover their significance: not racism, but a patriotic cry for help

DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES

Travelling around Essex, Hertfordshire and beyond in search of the meaning of the "Raise the Colours" movement, which has inspired people up and down the country to drape St George's flags from windows, bridges and lampposts, I came to a rather simple conclusion: we live in a great nation. We honestly do. I started my journey at the Bell Hotel in Epping, the centre of the protests against asylum seekers and half expected (based on some of the media coverage) to find myself surrounded by a bunch of raving, racist thugs. Er, not quite.

I chatted to Daniel, a brown-skinned 22-year-old with a Guyanese stepfather and white mother, who was on his way to the gym on Epping High Street. What do you make of all the flags (on lampposts, traffic lights, buildings), I asked. "Good idea, I reckon," he replied. "I am proud to be British and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. My parents are both immigrants [his mother hails from Ireland] and they are patriotic, too. I just think there is something wrong with people coming here on small boats who we don't know anything about. It isn't racist to point this out." Hear, hear, I thought.

The flag movement took off in the wake of the Epping protests. An online group of "proud English men" called for the waving of the St George's cross and Union Jack, and flags started going up everywhere from Bromsgrove and Worcester to Bradford and Norwich. Some of those attached to public buildings were taken down, in part because of the worry that it was all the work of the far right – and it's doubtless true that extremist activists are linked to the movement. But the broader phenomenon is, I think, quite different and more complex.

Perhaps the key thing to note is that this movement is, in no small part, about the expression of anger. As I was chatting to Daniel in Epping, the verdict was being handed down at Chelmsford magistrates' court on Hadush Gerberslasie Kebatu, 38, an Ethiopian who travelled to the UK on a rubber dinghy and was found to have approached a group of children and asked a girl back to his room at the Bell Hotel to "make lovely African babies". He then followed her the next day and put his hand on her thigh. He was found guilty of two counts of sexual assault.

"It happened over there," Cheri, 51, told me, pointing to the pavement outside the Duke of Wellington pub, a few hundred yards from the Bell. Cheri, a chef, was born in Whitby but has lived in Essex for two decades. "How can it be right that people come here without an invitation and harass our girls?" she said. "There is a special needs school right there" – she pointed to a building opposite the pub – "and the kids are vulnerable. Would you invite someone you didn't know into your home? In fact, many of these are people who have broken the law to gain entry."

I asked her about Operation Raise the Colours. "I like it," she said. "Like most people here, I am patriotic. I work really hard. In the mornings, I am a chef at a hotel, then go upstairs and clean the rooms, then clean offices in the afternoon. My children work hard, too. But why should we pay our taxes when the government is coughing up for hotel rooms to people who haven't paid into the system?" This was a lament I heard again and again. People are sick of playing by the rules while the government helps those who have, in their view, broken them by coming here uninvited.

How do you feel about the allegations of racism surrounding the flag movement, I asked. "That doesn't apply to me or my friends," she said. "I saw some lads at the protests with their shirts off, shouting abuse, and I thought: I hate that!" This was pretty much the same verdict from almost everyone I met, whether white or brown or anything in between. They loathe what they consider to be illegal migration but they loathe racism too.

Protesters outside the Bell Hotel in Epping last month

KEIR STARMER
YOU ARE
PUTTING OUR
GIRLS IN DANGER
THE ONLY
WAY IS
EPPING

In Waltham Forest, northeast London, I drove past a petrol station with a car wash staffed by three youngish men with brown skin, so pulled over. I was interested to see if they had experienced an increase in racism since the protests started. Shuayb – bearded, handsome, the son of Pakistani immigrants – turned out to own the car-washing operation. "I reckon the flags are a good thing," he said. "But one thing I don't get is why people are getting angry with the asylum seekers. If I was living in Eritrea and knew I could come here and get a hotel room, I'd definitely come. People shouldn't be angry at the asylum seekers; they should be angry at the government for allowing it to happen."

Have you experienced any racism since the protests started, I asked. "A couple of people have said stuff like, 'Why don't you go back to your own country?' over the last couple of weeks," he said. "I don't think England is racist compared to most places around the world, but some people are using the protests to stir it up. I am here building a successful business [he also owns the car wash at the nearby supermarket] and doing my best, but they don't care about that. They just see my colour."

He's right, of course. The problem with deconstructing any social phenomenon is that it is never uniform. The vast majority of those who support the flag movement are patriotic Brits without a racist bone in their bodies but I'd estimate that perhaps 5 per cent are bigots who have become ever more emboldened to express their racism. I couldn't help noticing the kerfuffle online last week when Douglas Carswell, a former Tory and then Ukip MP, tweeted: "From Epping to the sea, let's make England Abdul free!" This isn't dog-whistling to racism; it is pure, unadulterated racism. Like quite a few of the most outspoken commentators on Britain's migrant problem, Carswell does not even live here any more.

I saw this in Epping too: one guy, perhaps about 60, I chatted to in the lovely Olive café. It started off quite friendly, with conversation about flags and the like, as the Cypriot-born owner listened in. But then it started to turn uglier, with talk of white replacement conspiracy theories and antisemitism. It became clear that this goon was plugged into the far-right, online manosphere. But here's my hunch: he'd never have talked so openly about this fantastical nonsense a year ago, perhaps not even six months ago – just as Carswell would never have sent out that tweet.

And this is perilous. I wholeheartedly believe we should detain and deport all illegal migrants and dramatically reduce legal migration, but we must never go back to judging people on colour, name or ethnicity. What counts is what is in people's characters and hearts. My late father was called Abbas (not Abdul); he came here legally, married my mother and would have fought and died for this nation. It is why I urge people, wherever they stand on the political spectrum, to call out racism whenever they see it. It is the antithesis of Britishness.

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> **We must not go back to judging people on their name or ethnicity**

But let me finish with one final point – perhaps my deepest feeling of all. You've doubtless noticed that I rather admire national pride. I represented England at the Commonwealth Games and Team GB at the Olympics and never felt prouder than when seeing the flag on my tracksuit. Nations cannot survive without a sense of common purpose. I was in New York last week and saw the Stars and Stripes everywhere, just as the flag has fluttered in American towns and cities since the founding of this great republic. This is a nation whose patriotism surged as it rose to the peak of its powers; a nation where the flag has so often been a reflection of national self-confidence.

The outbreak of flag-flying here is, I think, fundamentally different. This is not a nation on the rise but one in relative (and potentially perilous) decline; a nation that has lost its way and doesn't quite know what it means any more. Millions of people are fed up with stagnant living standards; of working harder while feeling ever more squeezed; of being ignored by successive governments. Yes, the outbreak of flag-waving is partly about pride, but it is also, I sense, a cry for help. We have witnessed a bizarre experiment with mass immigration that the main parties promised to end, while serially violating their commitments. The sense of disenfranchisement and betrayal is therefore both raw and toxic.

And this is why we must get a grip on our borders. It is why we must end the experiment with ultra-progressivism – males playing in women's sport, the trashing of British history, the surreal overreach of DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion). It is also why we must invest in the left-behind places, such as parts of Epping. The alternative isn't more flag-waving of the kind we've seen in recent weeks but something infinitely darker. I am talking about the politics of people like Carswell – and it fills me with dread.

My favourite gloomsters conquered the world. No surprises there

Once mocked as a band for miserable youths, Radiohead are back on the road for the first time in seven years. Superfan and former glum teen *Jonathan Dean* charts their rise and rise

I first saw Radiohead live at a leisure centre in Reading. It was September 1997 and I'd just turned 17 – spots on my face, fake ID. Me and my friends had planned to talk to girls at the bar before the gig but we couldn't get served, so ended up throwing stones in the Thames instead. I lost my trainer in *Paranoid Android*, found it again in *No Surprises*, and would go on to see Radiohead 15 more times, from Wolverhampton to Chicago. It was a glorious day.

That turnaround is just what the band achieves for so many die-hard fans. First, lift them out of any gloom they might be feeling; second, turn them into slightly dreary obsessives – Hiya! – who just don't understand why everyone isn't sitting around talking about B-sides.

Anyway, Thom Yorke, Jonny Greenwood, Ed O'Brien, Colin Greenwood and Phil Selway are back – for 20 dates in the UK and Europe this winter, their first for seven years. Tickets go on sale on September 12 and, well, good luck to the original 'Heads like myself, because something has changed with Radiohead fandom since that mid-sized gym in Berkshire.

Thirty years ago, received wisdom said Radiohead were for teenagers not confident enough for Britpop but who wanted to learn about existentialism. Now? Oxfordshire's finest have long shed the nerdy label to become cool, in the process changing preconceptions that have plagued them since the 1990s – because, back then, everyone thought they were miserable. The jibes started with their breakthrough hit *Creep* and, to be fair, any song that goes "I wish I was special" is pretty bleak. Naysayers can have that one.

Then, though, Radiohead fans had to deal with *Clueless* (1995). In the high school-set film, Josh (Paul Rudd) listens to the band a lot, leading popular girl Cher (Alicia Silverstone) to call them "complaint rock". Ouch – ammunition to wags who make hyper-original wrist-slitting gestures whenever you mentioned *The Bends*.

However, consider the evidence. Not only does Josh end up dating Cher, but Rudd became his generation's sweetheart – not a creep, not a weirdo, but a hunk.

So Radiohead fans were right. They were correct in their 1997 decision to say quietly that *OK Computer* was, perhaps, better than Oasis's *Be Here Now*. But the band's innate coolness really blossomed with *Kid A* in 2000. Faced with a future filling stadiums, Yorke et al opted instead for electronica – and created their best music yet: rhythmic, elegiac sounds so far from being depressing they are essentially aural Prozac.

Jonny Greenwood and Thom Yorke in San Francisco in 2016

What's more, while it is one thing to be inspired, as music of the 1990s was, by the Beatles, our parents grew up with them. Not cool. From *Kid A* onwards, however, Radiohead introduced me to Aphex Twin, Sigur Rós and Autechre; plus old-timers Miles Davis and Scott Walker, because that was the music seeping into their new songs. If it weren't for *Kid A*, I would be listening to the pub rock of Britpop dregs Menswear. Curiosity, frankly, is cool.

As is telling everybody to buy Naomi Klein's anti-corporate book *No Logo*, as Yorke did in 2000. (I have read 30 pages in 25 years.) Also, it was cool to offer their 2008 album, *In Rainbows*, for free. Coolest of all, though, is that every anti-commercial move backfired. Radiohead have 40.7 million monthly listeners on Spotify; nine million more than Oasis, 30 million more than Blur.

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> **Radiohead fans were correct that OK Computer is better than Be Here Now**

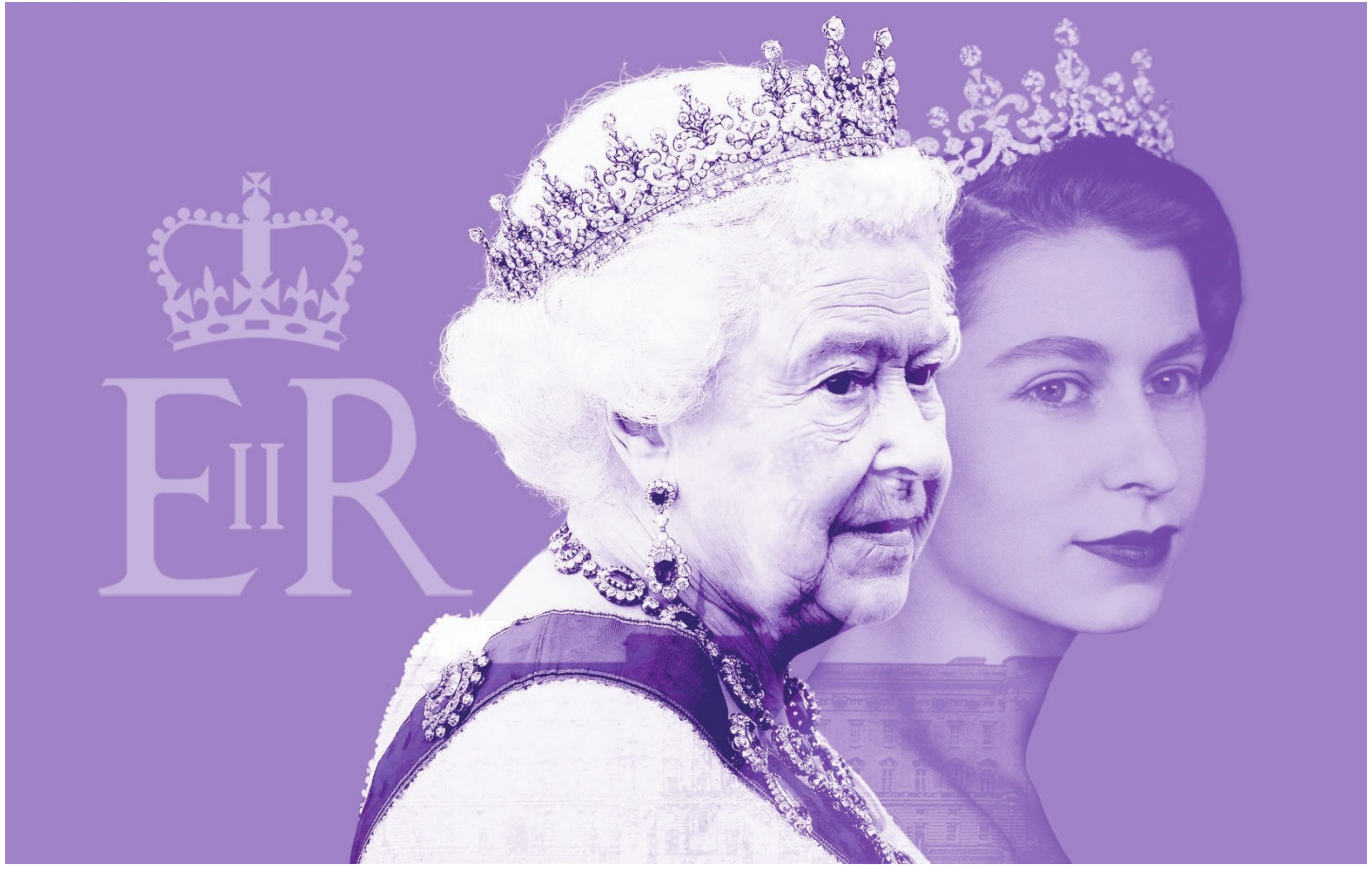
Their fanbase has become wide and entirely random. In 2020, Helen Mirren wore a Radiohead jacket on the red carpet. Madonna and Daniel Craig have attended shows. They soundtracked the fireworks at Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt's wedding.

So stick with it, acne-ridden Jonathan – you are on the right side of history. From Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* playing *Talk Show Host* as the film introduces Leonardo DiCaprio, to *Everything in its Right Place* soundtracking Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky*, no band has so inspired the savvier side of Hollywood since Martin Scorsese used the Rolling Stones in *Mean Streets*.

Director Paul Thomas Anderson is a friend of Yorke, and filmed him and his wife dancing through brutalist landscapes for a video a few years ago. In it, Yorke looks free. Fans followed his lead – he showed introverted teens that the world is a better place when you open up to it.

"If I can't enjoy this now, when do I start?" Yorke said years ago – a sentiment that sums up how a band, a man and his fans feel about these winter gigs. It's been a journey. Now we're ready to have the time of our lives.

ILLUSTRATION: KRYSTAL LOH



Seven decades as Queen, yet already fading from view

Three years after the death of our longest-serving monarch, the expected national trauma has not materialised — and nor has an obvious legacy. Are we forgetting her so soon, asks *Andrew Marr*

What happened to the shock? Where is the evidence of national scarring? Three years ago, before Queen Elizabeth's death, I argued that, when she went, "many older Britons will experience trauma". Her death would be, for millions, "the cutting of a living cord, a break in history ... the very ground will seem to move". Three years later, on firm ground, I must look myself in the mirror.

I did add that many others, including many younger Britons, "would wonder vaguely what all the fuss was about". But my prediction of some kind of emotional earthquake was pretty general. For The New York Times, for instance, her death "was a genuinely traumatic event, leaving many in this stoic country anxious and unmoored". Liz Truss, the prime minister at the time, called it "a huge shock to the nation".

Even making all allowances for the shock of the moment, there was a general sense that the demise of such a long-lived monarch would mark a wider break or caesura in the national story, something going far beyond the private sadness of royal enthusiasts. The long queues to say goodbye to her, a certain reflectiveness across the media, implied the same.

Yet, wasn't all this wildly wrong? What happened to the great national rumble? If we look around today, on the third anniversary of her death, surprisingly little seems to have changed at all.

The monarchy continues as a quiet presence away from the centre of national life. The King, elderly, restrained, a man of goodwill, seems to offer reassurance and continuity, much as his mother did. The younger royals' soap opera of rivalry continues almost unchanged from the later years of Elizabeth. The institution ages and may not appeal as it once did, but is not fractured.

There is quiet progress towards a national memorial for Queen Elizabeth at St James's Park in London and work has started behind some public toilets in Regent's Park for a commemorative garden. But the changes to the postal stamps and money, the swapping of KC for QC, the small adjustment to the national anthem, has all passed very calmly and without much notice.

It would be wrong to criticise the memorial planned for central London because all we have seen is early images from Foster + Partners. But if there is hesitation about how to look back, about the meaning of the reign, this seems manifest in the plans. There will be an elegant glass bridge over the pond, full of light and symbolism. For the traditionalists, a rather plodding-looking equestrian statue is planned, although there will be others too – of Prince Philip and the couple together – for those wanting a more informal note.

There is to be a lot of gardening, for who could object to gardening? And for those wanting a more modern feel, there will be a wind sculpture by Yinka Shonibare, featuring floral designs inspired by the late Queen's coronation gown.

Something, then, for everyone. It may work well together but it feels, ahead of the final designs next spring, somewhat tentative and unsure – even half apologetic. Geographically, the memorial will be adjacent to the huge Queen Victoria monument in front of Buckingham Palace. Imaginatively, however, it will be in a different world.

Although Victoria was completed only in 1924, she belongs to another age entirely. A disapproving-looking monarch sits atop a writhing phantasmagoria, bulging with marble representations of constancy, courage, motherhood, justice, truth, progress and possibly apple pie too. She is buttressed by mermaids and mermen to represent naval might, and surrounded by snarling lions and torch-bearing youth.

The Victoria monument is, in its way, rather glorious, and won its sculptor, Thomas Brock, a knighthood. But Brock's bloated stone and gilt funerary eruption of imperial swagger offers a way of explaining the current relative silence about Elizabeth II today.

It is really about power, conquest and military might. No surprise there: the grandest national memorials are often erected by military powers at moments of pomp and triumph.

We are not that kind of people any more. Even thinking on the scale of the Albert Memorial, that similarly exuberant gothic spaceship, for instance, would feel somehow embarrassing today – too boastful; too swaggering; just not us.

Through most of its history, the monarchy and the military have been completely intertwined. Today, with an army of fewer than 74,000 full-time soldiers and only 16 major warships, the British military has declined dramatically, and this has, inevitably, affected the monarchy to which it swears allegiance. For all those hours she sat on a horse watching the Life Guards clatter past, or rows of bobbing bearskins, the late Queen understood the realities very well.

She took the Commonwealth very seriously, as a kind of afterlife of empire, but that too is in decline. And indeed, a lot of Queen Elizabeth's popularity was about her realistic modesty; her personally understated and frugal style. She never forgot that she was Queen and believed the institution had to maintain a certain scale, and yet she hated swank. I suspect she would have regarded a grander national memorial to herself, bulging with marble symbolism, as something tasteless, to be giggled at from behind a curtain. The monuments to her own parents were almost domestic.

So, what happened to that terrible national trauma of three years ago? First, a lot of genuine grieving and sadness did happen, distributed silently round the country, and still goes on in private homes – when people are walking the dog, or reflecting on old photographs.

This is a quite intimate matter. When we lose a relative, if we loved them, then they stay. They do not quite leave us, muttering advice at unexpected moments, appearing at the edge of things like shadows, until they eventually fade away. The same is surely true of national figures on whom we have projected a relationship.

Second, there has been plenty to take our minds off the passing of even such a long-lived monarch. Those who expected Charles III to be a poor king, an interfering head of state who would have us yearning quickly for his mother, have been confounded. He hasn't interfered. He has been dignified and turned up whenever he could. That is all that was needed.

Queen Elizabeth died at a time when the country seemed politically deeply divided, and politics was an embarrassing Tory soap opera. For all the earnest attempts of a new Labour government to "turn the page", the country seems today even angrier and more divided than it was then. Scandal, as we see this weekend, has not vanished from Westminster. We have not learnt how to be more productive. We are no safer. If Elizabeth was the embodiment of "don't make a fuss, keep quiet, carry on, be kind" then perhaps we need her stoicism more than we need her statues.

Beyond all this, perhaps there is an even wider message. Broadly speaking, a modern democracy is an agglomeration of individuals and families trying peaceably to get on with their lives together in a defined area. It is not an incandescent national idea. It is not the projection of a leader's personality through the state. We think about ourselves before we think about monarchs or epochs. And perhaps, unromantically, that is how it should be.

> **Stoicism may be better than statues**

Elizabeth's hearse on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh

LESLEY MARTIN/GETTY IMAGES

Armani had a business mind as sharp as his tailored suits

The Italian designer, who died last week, ripped the stuffing out of fashion and restitched it for the masses. *John Arlidge* recalls his no-filter interviews and withering put-downs of rivals

Giorgio Armani, who died on Thursday aged 91, made our wardrobes and world *più bello*. Without him, there would be none of the soft-shouldered suits and cardigan jackets so many of us wear today and none of the designer fragrances, jeans, sunglasses, or watches – brand extensions that he pioneered. Worse, the England football team would still be wearing Glenn Hoddle-inspired beige suits.

I know this because The Sunday Times asked me to cover his business for three decades. I was there when he dressed David Beckham and his team-mates in the 2000s. I interviewed him in his Nobu-branded restaurant in Milan 40 years after the creation of his brand – when he told me Prada is "for snobs" and Versace for "sluts". He invited me to the 2007 Vanity Fair Oscars party where he introduced me to all the stars "wearing me" – but was just as keen to show me how he catered for the mass market with his cheap(ish) Armani jeans.

He analysed the market brilliantly and also personally oversaw every detail of each collection, runway show, advertisement and pricing strategy to make sure his products would sell in their millions, generating annual revenues of £2 billion.

It was his focus on the bottom line as much as hemlines that partly explains why he never came out. No one denied he was gay and had a partner but when asked he always said: "It's personal and private." He worried, probably correctly, that his business in the Asian market might suffer if he was open about his sexuality.

Ever since he sold his VW Beetle for £500 so he and his then partner Sergio Galeotti could set up his label, Mr Armani – no one dared call him Giorgio – was driven by two business and style goals. First, to rip the stuffing out of fashion and second, to make it fun and affordable for everyone. He had grown up in the postwar era of austerity and stiff formality and wanted none of it. At our first meeting in his design studio in the early Noughties, he explained: "I make clothes which are smart but not too formal, fashionable but not too trendy. Fashion's purpose is to make it easier and more elegant to live."

The public agreed. His elegant, drapey gowns, slouchy trousers and cardigan jackets dominated fashion for a generation. He created a working uniform for women while also paving the way for the rise of high-end sportswear and new dress codes, notably smart casual. Before Armani most men thought cashmere mix was a bar snack.

He was hard-charging. I watched him tell staff, even the women, to "pull their balls out" when he felt they were slacking. He once ended an interview when I dared to ask him about retirement. "This conversation is a disaster," he harrumphed.

The creation of his $10 billion lifestyle brand reached its peak with the opening of his hotels in Dubai and Milan, where guests work out in the Armani gym, before Armani-clad staff serve Armani food on Armani plates, on Armani tables, in Armani restaurants. In 2010 he told me proudly: "I have invented an entire world – Armani-land."

Fashion designers who transform the industry and wider society, let alone create their own universe, are few – Coco Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent, Karl Lagerfeld, Ralph Lauren and Giorgio Armani. The one I – and I venture most people – will miss the most is Italy's one-man brand.

Giorgio Armani at work in Milan in 1983

Are police really handcuffed by our free speech laws?

The Met's defence over the arrest of Graham Linehan is that officers simply uphold the rules. *Dipesh Gadher* explores what really happened

When Graham Linehan arrived at the gate at Arizona airport to board a flight to London last Monday, he sensed that something was amiss. On handing over his passport, the television comedy writer was told by an airline official that he did not have a seat and would need to be reticketed. Linehan, 57, the Irish-born creator of hits such as *Father Ted* and *The IT Crowd*, dismissed the apparent glitch as an "innocent" error.

Yet when he landed at Heathrow he says he was met by five armed officers from the Metropolitan Police. "They escorted me to a private area and told me I was under arrest for three tweets," he said on his blog.

Linehan was questioned on suspicion of inciting violence through gender-critical posts, which he had written on X in April.

After his blood pressure spiked to potential stroke-inducing levels during the police interview, Linehan was escorted to A&E and placed under observation.

He was later released on bail under the proviso that he stays off the social media platform. "I was arrested at an airport like a terrorist, locked in a cell like a criminal, taken to hospital because the stress nearly killed me and banned from speaking online – all because I made jokes that upset some psychotic cross-dressers," Linehan summed up.

The heavy-handed arrest is the latest in a series of incidents that have led to claims police are stifling free speech and taking sides in so-called "culture wars" rather than prioritising more serious crimes. It prompted Nigel Farage, the Reform UK leader, to compare Britain to North Korea when he gave evidence last week to a US congressional committee.

Linehan has said he intends to sue the Met for wrongful arrest. However, the force's commissioner, Sir Mark Rowley, defended his officers' actions and instead appeared to blame politicians for putting police in an "impossible position" over investigating online speech.

He said on Wednesday that "where there is ambiguity in terms of intent and harm, policing has been left between a rock and hard place by successive governments who have given officers no choice but to record such incidents as crimes when they're reported. Then they are obliged to follow all lines of inquiry and take action as appropriate."

The Met chief added: "I don't believe we should be policing toxic culture wars debates and officers are currently in an impossible position."

Linehan's views on trans issues have previously led to him being banned from Twitter (now X). They have also cost the comedy writer a significant amount of work and played a role in the collapse of his marriage.

His arrest relates to three posts he wrote on X on April 19 and 20. One of the posts, which Linehan describes as a joke, stated: "If a trans-identified male is in a female-only space, he is committing a violent abusive act. Make a scene, call the cops and if all else fails, punch him in the balls."

Linehan has claimed that the comment was reported to the Met by a trans rights activist and former police officer, Lynsay Watson. Watson was dismissed from Leicestershire police after trolling another free speech campaigner online.

The decision to detain Linehan is understood to have been made by an officer below superintendent level and went no further up the Met chain of command.

Sources said this weekend that Rowley and other senior figures at the force were "very much unaware" about what had happened until Linehan went public.

The commissioner's suggestion that officers' hands are in effect tied by the law has, however, raised some eyebrows.

In an interview before Linehan's arrest, Sir Andy Marsh, Britain's longest-serving chief constable, who heads the College of Policing, a national standards body, warned police "have lost our muscle memory" to tackle "basic" crimes.

Marsh said new legislation, stretching back to the Malicious Communications Act in 1988 and an update in 2003 to cover electronic messages, had increased the police workload. He added: "We are spending too much time investigating and responding to too low a level of what is effectively the exchange of 30 words."

The situation has not been helped by a boom since 2014 in the recording of non-crime hate incidents. These are actions – often posted online – that do not meet the criminal threshold but constitute hostility or discrimination towards a victim with a protected characteristic. "We need to take responsibility for some of the clutter that we have created," added Marsh. "Everyone in policing should be using common sense and sound judgement."

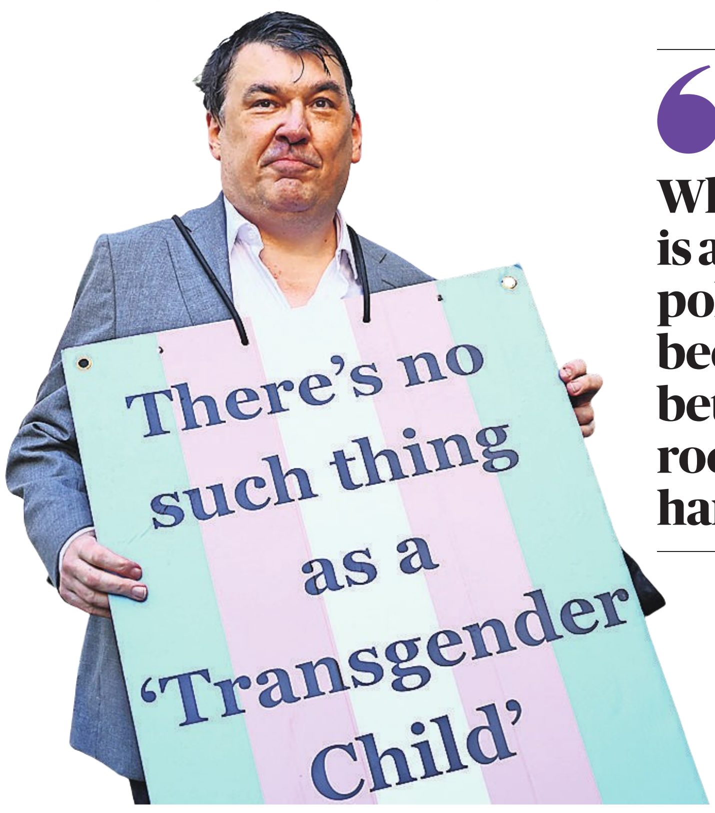
It is a view shared by Lord Blunkett, a former Labour home secretary. "It's not legislation but good social antennae that will help the police," he said this weekend. "If you need to warn someone for unacceptable language and alleged incitement then do so quietly and without a show of force – unless that person is known to be involved with an organised terrorist or extreme group."

Rowley admitted himself that a "more stringent triaging process" should be adopted "to make sure only the most serious cases are taken forward in future".

However, a source at the Met claimed this would provide only a "sticking plaster" until politicians "change or clarify" laws on hate speech and freedom of expression.

Linehan could find out as early as this week if investigators are likely to press ahead with charges or drop the case. But, in his view, the damage has been done. Following his arrest, Linehan wrote: "To me, this proves one thing beyond doubt: the UK has become a country that is hostile to freedom of speech."

> **Where there is ambiguity, policing has been left between a rock and a hard place**


There's no such thing as a 'Transgender Child'

The comedy writer Graham Linehan outside Westminster magistrates' court last week

Don't worry, my lord, Downton will keep making an absolute pile

As the Downton Abbey finale opens in cinemas, *Robert Watts* calculates what the upper-crust drama will earn its creator and film locations — and all thanks to those dreadful Americans

As a master storyteller famed for spinning films and television shows out of the country estates and stately homes of old money, Julian Fellowes – Lord Fellowes of West Stafford – might seem a surprising champion of new money.

On the cusp of the release of the final chapter of his *Downton Abbey* saga, Fellowes has grumbled at Britain's "curious double standard of hating the rich and hating anyone who has been very successful, and yet wanting it".

"I don't get it," the former jobbing actor who transformed himself into an Oscar-winning screenwriter told the Radio Times. "It seems to me ungenerous not to admire people who have done very well."

Fellowes has certainly done very well from the Downton jamboree – and he is not alone. Six TV series and three films charting the lives of the Crawley family, their servants, friends and anyone with the chutzpah to marry into the fictional Yorkshire dynasty have also proved lucrative for the cast, production staff and media platforms as well as tour guides and those selling at times dubious merchandise. But 15 years since the first episode aired, just how much money has Downton made?

Transition to the big screen would prove a financial triumph. The first Downton film in 2019 took $194.7 million at the box office – its budget was just $20 million. *A New Era*, the second film, was released three years later and took $92.7 million.

Will the new film, *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale*, also prove box-office gold? Some of the early reviews for the new film have been what Lord Grantham might have called "absolute stinkers". But it would be a bold call to predict that *The Grand Finale* will be a commercial calamity.

Tracking how much Fellowes he has made from his screenwriting over the years is not possible because his two companies – Praemium Intentus (Latin for intended prize) and Launcelot W Films – are of a type that have no legal obligation to publish annual accounts.

A prolific writer for television, Fellowes will have had his biggest paydays from his film work. He won his Oscar for the screenplay of *Gosford Park* in 2001.

Over the years, films that Fellowes has written, produced or directed have taken more than $700 million at cinema box offices. From behind the camera, star creatives in the film world can ultimately earn around 10 per cent of a film's takings.

ALAMY

Elizabeth McGovern and Hugh Bonneville in Downton Abbey, filmed at Highclere Castle

All told, it seems unlikely that he has earned less than £50 million from his pen over the years.

The financial winners from Downton's success extend well beyond Fellowes. The Centre for Economics and Business Research estimates that tourism to the Downton filming locations has generated £172 million in consumer spending since the show began to air.

Highclere Castle trades nicely from being cast as Downton Abbey. The 5,000-acre estate on the Hampshire-Berkshire border has been owned by the Carnavon family for almost 350 years and Fiona Canarvon, the 8th countess, has a range of revenue streams.

From February she is offering her "From Downton Abbey to Tutankhamun" tour. The £140 ticket price includes a guided visit of the house and a copy of her latest book.

Other purveyors of Downton "merch" may cause some pearl-clutching. At the website downtonabbey.shop and you will find stationery, clothes and homeware made in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Ultimately, the real winners lie far from British shores. Comcast, the US media giant, controls the rights to the show through its ownership of the London-based producer, Carnival Films. This means Comcast reaps vast sums not just from *The Grande Finale* but from Netflix's streaming of the 52 TV episodes.

Downton aficionados will recall Lord Grantham was only able to cling on to his home and estate by marrying Cora, an American heiress. So perhaps it's not unfitting that it's a US company that now reaps the biggest rewards from the Downton legacy.

More free hours for less money. It doesn't add up

The extension to free childcare is a boon for parents but, at £4.70 per child per hour, looks set to cost nurseries a fortune. *Katie Gatens* learns how childcare providers are coping

JOSHUA BRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

To the outside observer, Wood Street is the model of a nursery that gets it right. In the grounds of a former church hall in Walthamstow, east London, children roam freely, pointing at ladybirds and splashing in puddles. Inside, they roll homemade play-dough, stack wooden blocks and squidge paint through tiny fingers.

"We follow the child's lead," explains Naomi Hillman, co-founder of Wood Street, which has the capacity to take 50 children. The youngsters pull on their own boots and coats, pour drinks and make mid-morning snacks. Hillman, with her business partner Elizabeth Oliver, founded the nursery almost seven years ago; it now has a waiting list of hundreds.

Things may look idyllic, but under the surface Wood Street is struggling to tally its balance sheet. In April, the Labour government announced an extension to free childcare hours. Eligible working parents would be able to access 30 free hours of childcare a week for children aged from nine months up to school age, and last week this came into effect. Before, only parents of three and four-year-olds could access the full 30 hours.

Eligible parents must be in work, earning the equivalent of at least 16 hours a week at minimum wage (roughly £10,000 a year) and no more than £100,000 a year each. The 30 free hours covers only 38 weeks a year; parents have to top up any extra hours themselves.

However, critics argue that the scheme is underfunded. It provides on average just £4.70 per child per hour. Nurseries say this does not cover the real cost.

I spent a day at Wood Street to find out how childcare providers were coping. Has Britain finally found a solution to its childcare problem – or, with thousands of nurseries already closed, is this the death knell for hundreds more?

Labour's announcement – first proposed by the Tory government in 2023 – was a boon for some, among them Lisa Ecker, whose three-year-old, Diego, attends Wood Street with her one-year-old, Ruby. Ecker is from Austria, where childcare is free. She has friends who want a second child but cannot afford the nursery fees. "When I told my family what we pay, they said, 'How can you ever afford this? This is like a mortgage.' "

The new policy has been a huge relief. Before last week, Ecker, who works in film special effects, was paying £1,500 for one child, Now she pays £1,100 for two: "It's making a huge difference." With the revised entitlement, the government estimates that parents are set to save an average of £7,500 a year.

But what about the nurseries? Is it the final straw for a sector that has been hit by chronic government underfunding and a recruitment crisis?

Hillman says that the system is "breaking". The only nurseries that will benefit from the scheme, she adds, are those that are "not full, because they're not good".

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Early Years Alliance (EYA), which represents 14,000 nurseries and childminders, says the widened scheme would be welcome in the long term if there was the infrastructure to support it. He points to the record closures in the past decade, with childminders hit especially hard – falling from 53,000 to 24,000 in a decade.

Leitch says the government is "appeasing parents". Although there is no question families need support, the alliance, the largest organisation representing the sector, was not consulted on how the new scheme would be delivered.

Many nurseries have said they are unable to meet demand. They can choose whether to opt into the scheme. According to a report published last year, as many as two thirds of nurseries said they were considering limiting the number of funded places for under-twos.

The EYA says there is a critical funding shortfall that runs the risk of driving the sector into the ground. The average of £4.70 per child per hour the government will pay nurseries (local authorities set the amount, based on a formula set out by central government) must cover "core services" such as staff wages and go towards overheads such as electricity, rent and water bills, some food, and providing learning materials including toys, paper, crayons and paint.

In 2021, after months of campaigning, the EYA revealed that the government had knowingly underfunded childcare subsidies by £2 billion in 2020-21. It was paying nurseries on average £4.43 an hour per child, and nurseries were having to try and fill the shortfall themselves: three and four-year-olds needed funding of £7.49 per hour. In 2024 the alliance estimated that the funding gap had grown to £5 billion a year.

Prior to last week, nurseries were using fees for children under three and those ineligible for free hours to subsidise costs for children on the government-funded hours. Now it is a bigger struggle.

> “Everybody says for what we do, it's not enough. It really isn't

So how to make up the additional costs? Wood Street and other nurseries charge a "consumables" fee of up to £157 a month to cover the cost of nappies, food and a "graduation ceremony", plus forest school, a dance class and a drumming class for Black History Month. In many nurseries this is a voluntary charge, but in reality it is increasingly relied upon to help top up the funding shortfall.

There is also a sector-wide staffing crisis. The increase in national insurance contributions has stretched budgets; Oliver says that 83 per cent of Wood Street's outgoings are on wages. Many nursery staff are paid little more than minimum wage – £12.21 an hour (age 21 and above). Apprentices under the age of 19 are entitled to just £7.55 an hour.

Wood Street prides itself on giving children freedom. Dylan, far left, and David appear to appreciate it

Oliver says: "I have heard of people who get given an apprenticeship at 17, but once they turn 19 they're dropped."

The National Day Nurseries Association says over the last eight years statutory minimum wages have risen at twice the rate of hourly funding rates. Nurseries have to pay a competitive wage to persuade staff to simply stay in the sector.

Nurseries around the country are reporting concerns, and many are at breaking point. Nicola Mackert, owner of The Children's Workshop Preschool in Sevenoaks, Kent, has long-serving members of staff on her team. "I want their pay to reflect their experience, dedication and performance. But we have to start each year [at] the minimum wage and go from there."

Mackert recently had a child not turn up for induction – meaning the nursery will not receive almost £9,000 of government funding for the year. "The parent said: 'I just wanted to keep my place open, as it's free.'" Until she can fill the space, the nursery is left with a shortfall.

Elly Royal, owner of Happy Days Nursery in Harrow, Middlesex, agrees that "early-years settings have to foot the bill for the shortfall". She wonders how to send a message to Westminster. "We don't have a union – we can't go on strike."

Smaller childcare providers are closing while chains take over high streets. According to Oliver and Hillman, Wood Street's waiting list is so long they could fill two more nurseries. The pair are desperate to open a second premises but keep losing out to big nursery chains, with the local council preferring a more stable investment. Many of these fast-growing nursery groups are venture capitalist-funded and operate at a loss.

"All this government money for 30 hours is going to be repaying these venture capitalists," says Hillman. "Or if their losses get too much and they fold, there's going to be huge, unfillable holes in childcare across the UK."

It is lunchtime at Wood Street and children and staff are sitting down for a lunch of barbecue chicken and roast potatoes. Staff must keep track of roughly a quarter of children with dietary requirements: some are vegan, others vegetarian or require meat prepared by a halal butcher. One in ten has a serious food allergy.

With a big smile, Liz Pereira, 57, is a warm, sunny presence. She has been at Wood Street for five years as a room leader and says the profession is undervalued: "People think we babysit."

Pereira is on shift from 7.45am until 5.20pm and the work sounds relentless, ranging from talking to parents to the physical toll of caring for young children all day, trying to stretch them educationally and dealing with their whirlwind emotions. Plus there are safeguarding issues. "Children chatting to you constantly – that's the good part of the job, but it's also quite draining," she says. "We can't just go and have a quiet moment and a cuppa."

She is paid £28,500 a year. "I don't know," she says – then pauses. "Everybody says for what we do, it's not enough. It really isn't. We are looking after somebody's most precious person. But I love my job. It is an absolute joy."

Wood Street is on the expensive side – it charges around £90 a day before the free hours. Oliver says childcare is only considered to be pricey because it is not properly funded by the state.

The government is proposing to raise the minimum wage by 4.1 per cent next year. "Is it going to put our funding up by the same amount?" says Oliver. "I doubt it. This is the best it's going to be, is my suspicion, and it will get harder and harder from this point on."

After a year of this exam-prep arms race, my stress has shot up to 11-plus

Parents may be more nervous than children this week ahead of the highly competitive grammar school test. Having spent thousands preparing her daughter, one mother prays it's been worth it

There's something in the air in Kent. It's not the first falling leaves, or the chatter of kids returning to the school playground. It's the palpable anxiety of 17,000 parents and their tweens, counting down the hours until the 11-plus exam this Thursday. How do I know this? Because my ten-year-old daughter and I are among them.

One of England's last "grammar counties", Kent has 38 selective secondary schools, more than any other UK county. There are around 163 grammar schools in England, concentrated in certain areas including Buckinghamshire, Birmingham and Essex, plus 66 in Northern Ireland.

To gain a place at grammar school, Year 6 pupils sit the optional 11-plus, known here as the Kent Test. The exam is split between English, maths, verbal reasoning (word puzzles) and non-verbal reasoning (fiendish symbols to baffle a Bletchley Park codebreaker). Children also complete a 30-minute creative writing piece. The pass rate hovers around 50 per cent.

This means that exam prep is an arms race. This year's exam will be the first since VAT fees for private schools came into effect, so competition seems fiercer than ever. Parents guard tutor recommendations like dragons hoarding gold. There's competition, sure, but of the unspoken, middle-class kind.

For state pupils, tutoring is almost essential, as their schools aren't allowed to prepare kids for the 11-plus, while prep schools can. No surprises, then, that last year in Kent prep school pupils massively outperformed their state rivals.

Our journey began 18 months ago. Our eldest daughter was exceeding expectations at maths and English and wanted to try for the test. Most of our nearest schools are selective and the comprehensives suffer by comparison (as the keenest learners are at the grammars). I contacted a tutor agency boasting a 100 per cent pass rate. It asked for a "casual Zoom chat" with my daughter (then aged eight), then announced (after reviewing a recording) it would only teach her if we undertook six months of "pre-tutoring" at £60 a session, followed by a mock test. It also wanted us to understand that it could drop her at any time if she was "underperforming".

We switched to a less-intense tutor and started weekly sessions in September 2024. All went well for six months, until the tutor left the company . With all the local tutors booked up, we ordered a brace of handbooks and taught her ourselves. My daughter and I tackled rhyming synonyms, pie charts and 29 types of verbal reasoning together, with tears, tantrums, and reward charts along the way.

We're not monsters; we tried to keep learning fun and have given our daughter plenty of opportunities to quit if she wants to. But the decision to pull the plug is just as consequential as the decision to press on. I constantly question if we're doing the right thing, but feel the system gives us little choice. I've been surprised how flawed the process is. I was staggered to discover that in 2024, a third of Kent entrants were applying from outside the county or from prep schools.

We've spent £2,400 on the process, including six months of private tutoring at £50 an hour, hundreds of pounds on books and practice papers, and £60 per month for the online platform Atom Learning. These sums would be impossible for many families, but a drop in the ocean compared with £15,000 termly fees at our nearest private school.

> “We tackled rhyming synonyms, pie charts and 29 types of verbal reasoning

Have we done enough? There are families who've been coaching their child since the age of six.

It's definitely possible to over prepare, says Hayden Stevens of Top Dog Tutoring. "I see it all the time, parents committing their children to two hours of practice per day after school. The majority of children will burn out in this situation and lose interest in the process. Where possible, make the learning low stakes and enjoyable for your child."

It hasn't all been bad. I'm proud of my daughter's resilience and her new skills. If it works out, she can go to an excellent grammar within walking distance and enjoy opportunities that we could never afford to pay for.

But was it all worth it? Ask me again in October. Or in five years.

THE SUNDAY TIMES
ESTABLISHED 1822

The Rayner fiasco must be a turning point for the PM

Let there be no doubt: one of the main reasons millions put their faith in Sir Keir Starmer's Labour last year was to end the daily soap opera that was British politics. The safe pair of hands promised by a technocratic, hard-working leader who campaigned in prose rather than poetry was attractive for those exhausted by the post-Brexit psychodrama that consumed no fewer than five Tory prime ministers.

After 14 months of policy flip-flops, a budget hangover that has lasted nearly a year, backbench revolts and resignations, many of those voters may be tempted to ask: what's changed? Last week was supposed to be a "reset" and "phase two" for Starmer's government after a summer dominated by small boats and uncertainty over November's budget. Instead it ended up with an enforced reshuffle after the resignation of the deputy prime minister, Angela Rayner, for failing to pay the requisite amount of stamp duty. The Rayner debacle has shades of last year's row over Starmer and his colleagues failing to declare freebies, which dragged on for weeks before being gripped by No 10.

The prime minister had been happy to give his full-throated support to his deputy, only to accept her resignation before the week was out. Rayner was the 11th person to leave the Labour government. Others include the Treasury minister Tulip Siddiq, the transport secretary Louise Haigh and the homelessness minister Rushanara Ali.

This drip, drip of events, underpinned by a flatlining economy, has played into the hands of Nigel Farage's poll-leading Reform UK, which celebrated at its conference in Birmingham and is seeking to present itself as a future government.

That said, there are some silver linings in Starmer's reshuffle that may just offer Labour a scintilla of hope. In promoting two of his toughest ministers, Shabana Mahmood and Pat McFadden, to the Home Office and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) respectively, he is signalling he recognises the extent of Labour's failures so far on migration, the economy and welfare reform. These three areas, along with the NHS, are the only domestic issues Labour should be concentrating on for the foreseeable future.

Mahmood, who has impressed with her decisiveness at the justice department, must begin by beefing up the deterrents to stop migrants wanting to come to the UK in the first place. She should launch an urgent review of the way we implement international laws in ways that make it easier for migrants to gain asylum here. There is clearly a debate to be had on the European convention on human rights and the UN refugee convention, and it is one that should be had without delay. Mahmood's precise views on the ECHR are hard to divine but, in any event, it might be more practical to temporarily rethink our approach to the UN convention. This, with its promise of asylum for anybody with a "well-founded fear" of persecution at home, has become the key marketing tool of people traffickers.

On welfare, McFadden must find a way of reducing an ever-growing bill or Britain will never claw its way back to economic growth. The present pattern of increasing taxes on business to fund the spiralling bill for benefits simply shifts investment from the productive areas of the economy to the unproductive. The calamitous failure to persuade backbenchers to accept reform of the personal independence payment (Pip) was the moment when Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, knew her sums no longer added up. The arrival of McFadden at the DWP could be the catalyst needed. In his own constituency, 11.8 per cent of working-age adults claim Pip, substantially above the national average. A simple return to more face-to-face assessments should be accelerated.

On the NHS, Wes Streeting's survival as health secretary is welcome, but the jury remains out on his reforms. He has licence to be bold and should grab it. Rayner's departure opens up another opportunity too. Her cherished Employment Rights Bill, which has caused great concern to business, is making its way through parliament. No 10 can now listen to sensible criticism and act accordingly.

With the Rayner tax affair, Starmer has spilt what little remains of public goodwill. Opinion polls suggest Labour simply represents "more of the same" and voters prefer Reform — or apathy — to the status quo. We are told the prime minister now has the cabinet and Downing Street team he wants. It is time for him to lead it.

Putin's harbouring of Assad is denying justice for Colvin

It is 13½ years since The Sunday Times lost one of its brightest stars. Marie Colvin, our famously intrepid foreign correspondent, was murdered by Bashar al-Assad's thugs while exposing the barbarity of his actions in the civil war in Syria.

From a makeshift media centre in the besieged city of Homs, Colvin, 56, had been describing on US television how she had just witnessed the death of a baby fatally injured by Assad's army.

Syrian forces traced the satellite signal and launched an artillery strike on the centre, killing her and the 28-year-old French photographer Rémi Ochlik and seriously injuring her photographer, Paul Conroy, who is now working on the front line in Ukraine. The French reporter Édith Bouvier and a local translator, Wael al-Omar, were also injured. Assad's psychotic younger brother Maher rewarded one of the killers with a luxury car, and his head of security in the city hosted a party to celebrate the murders. In 2019 a court in Washington found Assad's regime liable for this extrajudicial killing and ordered the dictator to pay $300 million in punitive damages. Of course, he never did and clung on to power until December, when he was toppled by rebel fighters. Perhaps inevitably, he received a welcome and, ultimately, sanctuary from President Putin and lives in exiled luxury in Moscow.

Last week the French authorities issued seven arrest warrants for him, his brother and five henchmen over the targeted bombing of the journalists. He and his officials will now be arrested and sent to be tried in France for war crimes and crimes against humanity if they cross into the West. That may be no time soon, but it was 13 years between the indictment and arrest of the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic for genocide. He is now serving a life sentence in jail. The arrest warrants should remind us that the fight for justice for Marie Colvin continues.

The royal meh

Good news for patriots: your numbers are likely to swell. It is widely assumed that the young are the least patriotic cohort, but as we report today, that isn't so: 16 and 17-year-olds are more proud of their national identity than the British population overall.

Bad news for royalists: our survey also revealed that this generation is indifferent to the monarchy. More want to abolish it than want to keep it, but more still simply don't care either way.

A generation of patriotic republicans? It's an odd picture, but perhaps it should come as no surprise. The post-Brexit generation were not caught up in the bitterness of that debate and clearly still see much to celebrate in British life and values; but they have had to witness a royal family beset by division and irrelevance.

If it is to survive, the monarchy must win them round. Showing a little unity and reconciliation might be a good place to start.

Dominic Lawson

I foresee growth in the clairvoyance racket

Exploiting the modern age's narcissism, fortune-telling is in the ascendant

As if France did not have enough problems in the real world, now her fake version of it is in turmoil: there is a clairvoyance crisis. As The Times reported last week: "The French authorities are under pressure to regulate … after claims by the National Institute of Divinatory Arts that three quarters of the country's 100,000 or so fortune-tellers are incompetent and dishonest." Yes, the nation's respectable charlatans are appalled by the decline in standards, caused by the proliferation of online fortune-telling. The institute's chairman, Youcef Sissaoui, said most fortune-tellers in France "are only trained to defraud people" and estimated that at best 5 per cent of them were "honest and really competent".

So here's my question (not an original one) for the supposed 5 per cent of French fortune-tellers who truly can see the future. Why are they working in this tatty trade for a not especially good living, when they could use their gifts to become unimaginably rich?

They might, for example, divine the winning numbers for the next EuroMillions lottery. Though I suppose there'd be a rush to be the first fortune-teller (literally) to fill out the preordained successful numbers, those clairvoyants who missed out needn't worry. They could rapidly accumulate a colossal fortune by day trading — since clairvoyance would inform them of which shares to buy and when to sell, without the slightest risk. Admittedly, the stock market authorities might become suspicious if the fortune-telling day trader made only profits and never losses; so the cautious clairvoyant would also buy a few shares he or she knew were going to collapse.

It seems appropriate that we use a French word — clairvoyance — for the supposed supernatural ability to see into the future, as a number of the country's rulers have been superstitious in this way, even in the 20th century. General de Gaulle consulted an astrologer, Maurice Vasset, throughout his time in office. Vasset recalled: "Sometimes he took certain things which I had pointed out to him seriously. But after the crisis of 1968 when I went to the Élysée to advise him against holding a referendum which I saw he was going to lose, he did not want to believe me."

More recently, that most cynical of French presidents, François Mitterrand, did not extend his natural scepticism to astrology. Élizabeth Teissier, the author of You and Your Stars columns for various French newspapers, was called for personal consultations by Mitterrand between 1989 and 1994. A few years after his death, she proved this by releasing tape recordings of some of her "consultations" with the occupant of the Élysée Palace. In one of them, on February 1, 1991, he asks her what would be the most propitious day to make a speech about the progress of the Gulf war: "When is the next best day for me to speak? Could you check for me?" On August 20 Teissier warns him: "From tomorrow I'm very much afraid that Yeltsin risks being ousted." Mitterrand, sounding concerned, replies: "Oh really? Do keep me abreast of all that."

Alas, columns similar to those of Mme Teissier are still given, daily, extensive space in a number of our own newspapers, with information attached about phone lines for what purport to be more personal consultations (at a price). In last Thursday's prognostication for my supposed star sign, I was advised by one newspaper's stargazer: "You've been sprinting ahead, but a pause today may help you protect the peace you've been pushing for. Sometimes putting off the practical stuff until you feel ready is just a distraction. Make a move today and enjoy the sense of satisfaction that comes from taking action." So, I should both "pause today" and "make a move today", and whichever of those contrary pieces of advice I take, the fortune-teller can take the credit if things go well.

It is more than three quarters of a century since an American psychologist, Bertram Forer, conducted an experiment that exposed the basic trick of this trade. He gave each of his students what he claimed was a tailored individual horoscope and asked all of them to mark out of five the accuracy of its personal observations. The average mark given by his impressed students was 4.26, or 85 per cent. He then revealed that he had given all of them exactly the same text, made up of jumbled extracts from recent horoscopes for all the star signs. Stuff like: "You have a great need for other people to like and admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage."

What the astrologer never does is to suggest the client has the slightest possibility of moral failings. It is all in the language of flattery and reassurance. So when The Times ran a story in January under the headline "Generation Z turn to astrology to answer life's big questions" — suggesting the practice was replacing traditional religions — it was tempting to see it as the perfect manifestation of an increasingly narcissistic society.

As a newspaper editor, a quarter of a century ago, I tried in vain to prick this bubble by commissioning a weekly spoof astrology column, Psychic Psmith. "Psychic" — as he was known in the office — would expose the vague vapidities of his competitors on other papers: "I like to think that my unrivalled record of specificity speaks for itself. In 2002 alone, for instance, I correctly called three greyhound races, predicted the winner of *Celebrity Big Brother* and informed the Burley family from Cheadle a week in advance that their N-registered Vauxhall Cavalier estate would run out of windscreen washer fluid."

Those who seriously claim supernatural powers, whether fortune-tellers or mediums, were, in this country, regulated by the Fraudulent Mediums Act 1951; it was removed from the statute book in 2008 when the Labour government harmonised UK law with EU consumer protection legislation (which does not make specific reference to these forms of charlatanry).

But fewer than ten successful prosecutions had been brought in the previous twenty years under the Fraudulent Mediums Act. And we were a country in which the medium Doris Stokes, whose (obvious) tricks were exposed only after her death, became a national treasure. So much so that in April 1985 she was Roy Plomley's guest on *Desert Island Discs*. Plomley treated her with complete credulity, even when she repeated her familiar falsehood that she had helped the police solve various serious crimes, through her supernatural powers. Or likened her ability to oscillate between the world of the living and the dead to that of Jesus: "What's good enough for Jesus Christ is good enough for Doris Stokes." To which Plomley responded with a chuckle: "Another record, please."

We really can't sneer at the French.

> **“ Why don't they win the EuroMillions and become hugely rich?**

Hadley Freeman

Even now we can't stop wuthering over bad men

A new screen Heathcliff points to our unhealthy taste in romantic heroes

How strange that a trio of 19th-century virgins should still be defining the tastes of modern sexuality. Far more than Hollywood or Hugh Hefner, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë set the template for what kind of man should make women swoon, with *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr Darcy, *Jane Eyre*'s Mr Rochester and — most of all — *Wuthering Heights*'s Heathcliff. These characters have endured far longer than any star (film, pop or porn) as icons of masculinity, and the trailer released last week for the latest *Wuthering Heights* film — directed by Emerald Fennell, starring Margot Robbie as Catherine and Jacob Elordi as Heathcliff — is a good lesson in how this has happened.

Certainly Elordi — scowling and swarthy, as the book dictates — looks set to do to a new generation of audiences what Timothy Dalton as Rochester (in the 1980s BBC series) and Colin Firth as Darcy (in the 1990s BBC series) did to their mothers and grandmothers. It remains to be seen if Jack Lowden as Darcy can hit the same literary G-spot in Netflix's coming *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation, given that he is — handkerchief clutched in horror! — blond, rather than the traditional brooding brunette.

To be fair to Lowden, Austen didn't provide much description of Darcy, beyond "tall" (obviously), "handsome" (naturellement) and, most of all, "having ten thousand pounds a year". For Austen, money defined the man, whereas for the less pragmatic Brontë sisters it was having "a dark face, with stern features" (Rochester) and resembling "a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman" (Heathcliff). Byronic and baleful, glowering and growling: this has long been the formula for casting this interchangeable Holy Trinity of male sexiness, starting with Laurence Olivier as Darcy in 1940. The formula was followed a little too closely in the 1992 film of *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights*, with Ralph Fiennes overdoing it on the fake tan as Heathcliff. But it was really Fiennes's kohl eyeliner that pushed that particular film perilously close to parody.

And so to Fennell's film. To judge from the trailer, she certainly gets *Wuthering Heights*'s weirdness right, all those dream sequences backed by an appropriately heady (if not strictly 19th century) Charli XCX soundtrack. What it looks as if she gets wrong is the sex. Robbie's breasts heave excitedly and Elordi pants, "Do you want me to stop?" Well, every generation gets the *Wuthering Heights* it deserves, and it's inevitable that this one should get shots of Catherine eyeing up a muscly and topless Heathcliff (to quote arguably the greatest Austen adaptation, *Clueless*, "As if!"). Because, much as *Wuthering Heights* has become a byword for overheated love on the moors, the book itself is far more interested in ghosts and spirits than anything as corporeal as biceps or bosoms.

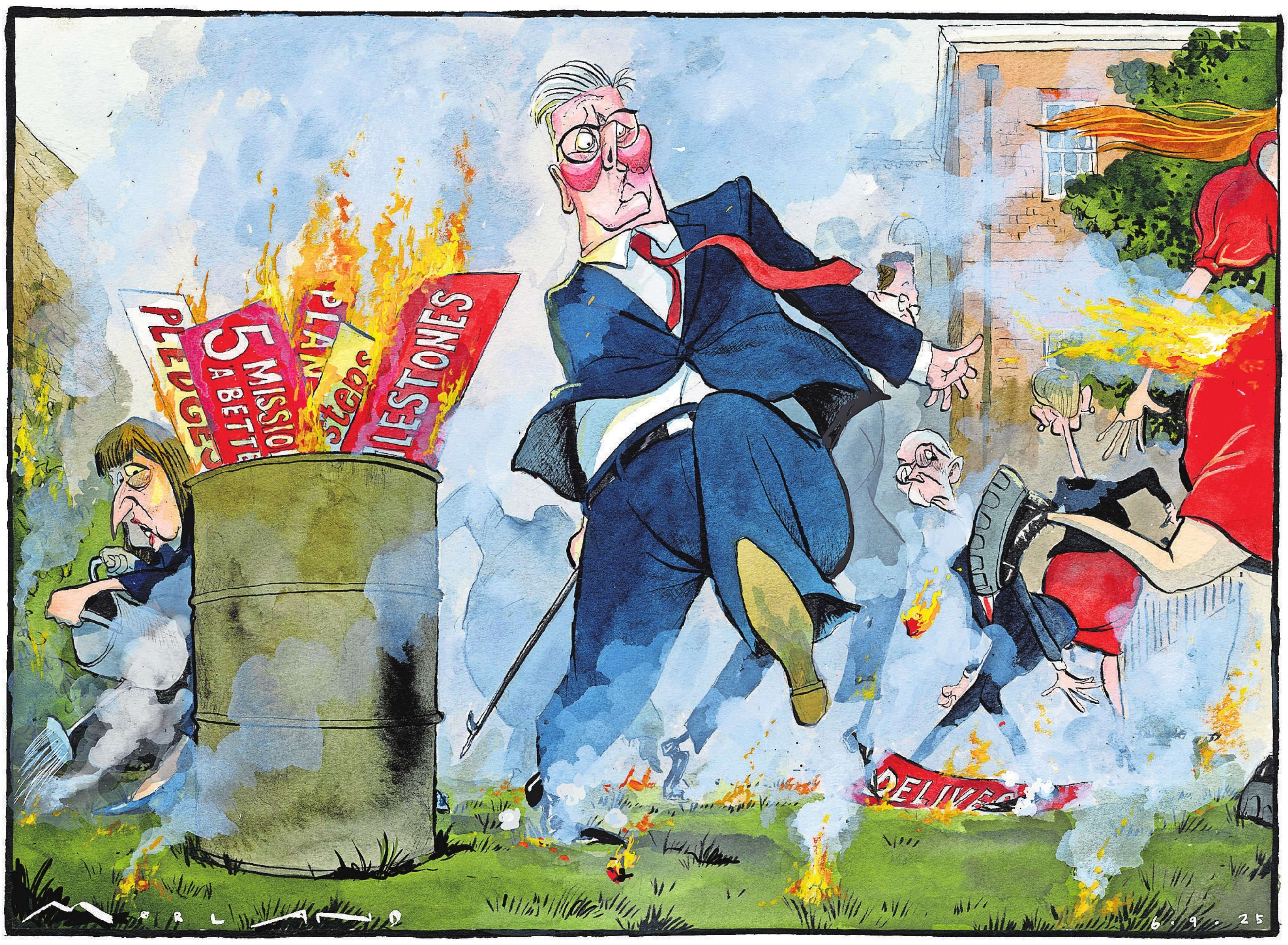
That's not just because of Victorian prudishness, but rather the specific strangeness of Emily Brontë. *Wuthering Heights*, her only novel, is far closer to the 18th-century tradition of gothic fiction than the 19th-century Dickensian novel, with Heathcliff digging up Catherine's body and the hints of quasi-incest between them and their children. Really, Kate Bush's song captures the nuttiness of this book better than most adaptations.

After Emily died at the age of 30, Charlotte wrote, "Wuthering Heights was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials." In reality, the Brontës weren't quite as isolated as legend has it, and the women were well read. But Emily was undeniably insular, creating intense imaginative worlds from childhood, often with her sister Anne. This is why the characters in *Wuthering Heights* intermarry so much, rarely meeting anyone beyond their closest neighbours.

It also explains her naivety about men, although she was hardly alone in that. Out of her, Charlotte and Austen, Charlotte was the only one who married — although she didn't write any books as a wife because she died a year later from complications in pregnancy. Only unmarried 19th-century women could conceive of Darcy, Rochester and Heathcliff as romantic figures, because anyone else would see them as the moody nightmares they were — you certainly don't get this kind of nonsense from George Eliot. At least Austen has Elizabeth admit she fell for Darcy "from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley", a blunt truth that modern adaptations generally mute in favour of romance. But Rochester (blind and broke by the end) and Heathcliff (a lunatic) have no such charms. They are human versions of the Beast, and Jane Eyre and Catherine Linton the Beauties who must learn to see past their faults, and given that Rochester locked his first wife in the attic and Heathcliff married Catherine's sister-in-law out of spite, that takes some doing. But, of course, they manage.

The real mystery is why modern women are still so entranced by these men when there are far better options in 19th-century literature. Most obviously there's the adoring, idealistic Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*, or heartbroken Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*, Austen's most grown-up novel. Wentworth is over 30, so verging on decrepitude, yet he is no slouch in the romance department, offering up lines like, "You pierce my soul." But — from *Wuthering Heights* to *Fifty Shades* — a lot of women still get off on the fantasy of taming the beast, no matter how many times we learn it never actually works. Those 19th-century virginal women weren't so naive after all. But we are.

> **“ Kate Bush's song best captures the nuttiness of this book**



Matthew Syed

I tried to be an MP so I've seen the disease rotting politics from within

To be a candidate requires so many trade-offs it's little wonder no one knows what Labour stands for

It gives me no pleasure to say this but the modern Labour Party is institutionally dysfunctional, perhaps even institutionally corrupt. That isn't to say that the other parties are morally pristine; it is to suggest that if you want to understand the distinctive (and devastating) predicament of the governing party – which believes in nothing, flip-flops on everything and is infused with a particular kind of hypocrisy – you must first diagnose the cancer at its heart. The Rayner saga is merely a symptom of this malignancy, albeit a telling one.

I say this as someone who believes in Labour Party values, at least as articulated by its greatest leaders, such as Clement Attlee and Tony Blair (in his first term, not when he went weird over Iraq and the like); leaders who combined vision with patriotism. The commitment to improving the life chances of working people, to building a more meritocratic society, is an aspiration to which I thrilled, and still thrill. It is why I joined the party in my twenties and still hope to see a realistic, progressive incarnation in my lifetime.

But that is not the Labour Party today. This is an institution that lost its way, in part because of its peculiar internal dynamics. I saw this up close when seeking to stand for parliament in 2010 (I'd previously stood in 2001), a period that took me to the heart of the Labour machine. It started with a meeting with Keith Vaz, the man charged with helping minority candidates (who later became notorious for corruption and sex scandals). We met in his office a few times and, to be fair, he was always affable (and immaculately turned out). I told him about myself: former sportsman, started a couple of businesses, write for The Times, done well financially.

Yet it was with this last admission that I realised I'd gone badly wrong. "You've done well financially? Mmmm. Do you own any properties other than the one you live in?" he inquired. "Well, yes," I said. "I have invested in both stocks and property." I could see that this wasn't going down well, so I explained that I was actually quite proud to have built a small property portfolio. "That won't do at all," Vaz said, frowning. "It isn't a good look. Don't mention this to anyone, even if you have to lie." "Lie?" I replied, stunned. "For f***'s sake, just keep your mouth shut," he said (I refused to comply).

I remember the feeling of queasiness as I left that meeting but my induction into Labour's surreal internal politics had only just begun. I was instructed to join a couple of trade unions and meet their bigwigs. Why? "You need the endorsement of a union because they have a lock on certain constituencies," Vaz explained. "Oh, and when you meet them, make sure you've read their policies and agree with everything they say." But much of what they say contradicts Labour policy, I protested. "Don't worry – just lie."

My first meeting was with Mary Turner of the GMB, a lovely woman who outlined the umbilical link between organised labour and "our" party but whose ideas were utterly unrealistic and destructive. I thought of pointing out, if only gently, that the unions were not always pure in their motivations and had even been known to feather their own nests at the expense of the nation, but thought better of it. This was not supposed to be a discussion but a test of intellectual malleability.

Then there was the formal interview. I took the Tube to Labour HQ on Victoria Street and was pacing about in a pub next door when my phone rang. It was a senior party official with an urgent message. "We have the list of interview questions," he said conspiratorially. "Get a pen and note them down." Again, I was mystified. "But aren't the questions supposed to be secret, to give all candidates a fair chance?" He giggled. "We have someone in the room who has leaked them for us," he said. "But don't worry: all the other candidates will be cheating too."

> **Strange to say, when the unions vetoed my candidacy, I almost felt relieved**

I could go on. I could tell you about a bizarre meeting with Nick Brown MP at a Mayfair nightclub called Whisky Mist (I remember telling the doorman I was due to meet the chief whip, before realising the S&M connotations), the instructions issued by backroom lobbyists, the labyrinth of vested interests. In the end (you won't be surprised to hear) I failed to win selection. I answered questions on education, economic policy and more from an interview panel that included Vaz, Tom Watson and Angela Eagle but I got a call from Watson that evening: "The panel thought you were the outstanding candidate, but the unions wanted someone else," he said. Strange to say, I almost felt relieved.

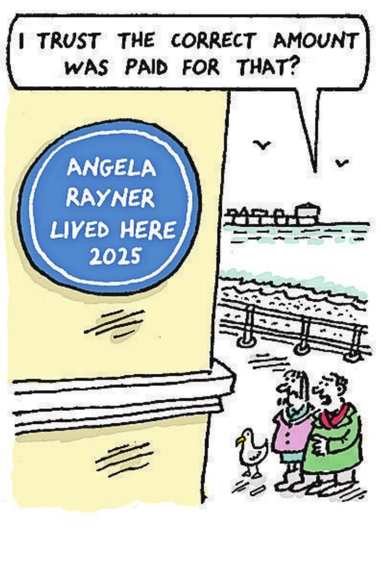
For by now I'd seen at close quarters the cancer at the heart of the modern Labour Party. This is an institution that has turned dissembling into an art form. Nobody progresses up the ranks without going through the sausage machine of candidate selection, a process that demands duplicity from the very start. It is a methodology that doesn't create politicians, but chameleons – people who will say whatever is expedient and believe in nothing. Not even socialism.

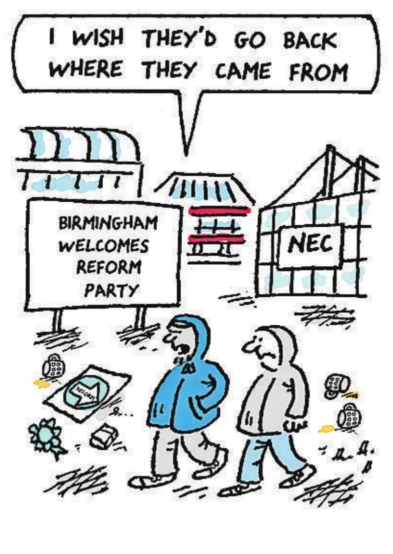
Look at how many Identikit ministers paraded as Marxists when Jeremy Corbyn was leader but now pretend to be fiscal hawks. Look at how they dog-whistled to antisemites when it was expedient, and then backtracked. Look at how they parroted trans activist dogma when it was in the ascendancy, not just for months but years. When asked the definition of a woman, Anneliese Dodds, who until this year was minister for women, said, "It depends on what the context is." David Lammy, now deputy PM, called campaigners like JK Rowling "dinosaurs hoarding rights" and told a radio interviewer: "A cervix, I understand, is something you can have following various procedures and hormone treatment." Lisa Nandy, the culture secretary, proclaimed herself a "big supporter of the trans community" in 2024 before backpedalling frantically when the wind changed.

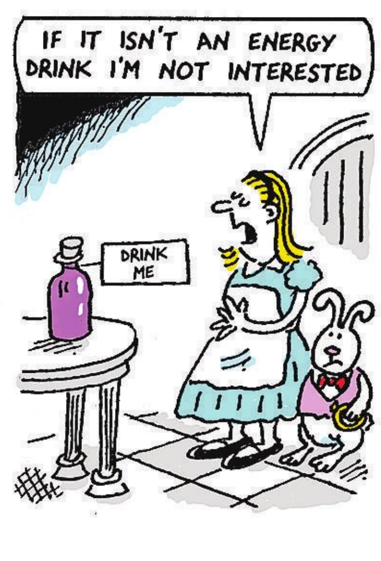
This isn't politics; it's institutional pathology. Look, too, at how Starmer proffered promise after promise during his leadership campaign (to abolish tuition fees, nationalise various industries etc) and then broke most of them without pausing for breath. And let us not forget Rayner, who publicly condemned tax avoidance and then indulged in it herself. For what it's worth, I think her misdeed was minor in the scheme of things, but I doubt she even saw the contradiction.

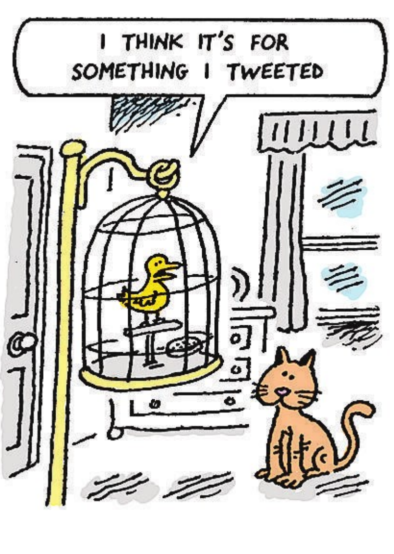
To repeat, I'm not suggesting other parties – Tories, Reform, Lib Dems – are bastions of purity; they are not. They all have distinctive pathologies, which is why millions of voters have switched off from politics altogether. But to understand the singular weirdness of the modern Labour Party, you have to look at its culture. Do you have a clue what it'll believe next week, next month? Do the bond markets? Does the party itself? This is a government with no rudder, no map, no compass, no vision, no helmsman, no clue. But this is ultimately not about Starmer, Lammy or even Rayner. It's what happens to an institution when candidates are taught not to come up with a vision, but to bend and buckle, evade and deceive.

NEWMAN'S WEEK


I TRUST THE CORRECT AMOUNT WAS PAID FOR THAT?
ANGELA RAYNER LIVED HERE 2025


I WISH THEY'D GO BACK WHERE THEY CAME FROM
BIRMINGHAM WELCOMES REFORM PARTY
NEC


IF IT ISN'T AN ENERGY DRINK I'M NOT INTERESTED
DRINK ME


I THINK IT'S FOR SOMETHING I TWEETED

What's Appening

The WeChat Group International Rebel Alliance*

Kim Jong-un Hey bros, cool parade. Loved all the missiles and the robot dogs. I'm setting up this WeChat group so we can continue to build our strong and stable global alliance of good guys

Jong-un Guys? You just have to click "accept invite"

Kim Ju-ae Daddy, the chef says I'm not allowed any more cakes even though I've only had four. I want him killed

Kim Dear daughter, I've told you you can't just have people killed

Kim Jr But you always have people killed

Kim Not now, daughter. I'm busy doing strong and stable alliances of good guys

Kim Jr But I'm hungry

Kim NOT NOW!

Kim Jr … and I want one of those robot dogs. You promised me I could have a robot dog

Kim Guys?

Vladimir Putin Who is this?

Kim This is the Kimster, bro. I'm on my armoured train heading back to Pyongyang. What are you up to, bro?

Putin Oh, you know, head of state stuff

Kim Don't I know it, bro, It's exhausting dealing with all the dissenters

Putin Dissenters gonna dissent

Kim Preach

Putin And these special military operations aren't getting any easier. Are you still OK to send more troops?

Kim I mean, yeah, sure but what happened to the last lot?

Putin I told you, they're fine. They keep saying how much they're enjoying fighting the capitalist dogs and wouldn't it be great if you could send more to join the party

Kim Can't you ask Xi? He's got millions

Putin Who, Winnie the Pooh? He's not committed like you … he doesn't understand that this is a struggle between good and evil

Kim Like Star Wars?

Putin Exactly. You get it

Kim I love Star Wars. I love basketball. I also love Winnie the Pooh. He's always trying to get the honey. It's so funny

Xi Jinping What are you saying about Winnie the Pooh?

Kim Nothing

Putin Nothing

Kim Honestly, we were just saying how great the parade was

Xi OK then

Putin Don't be like that, Jinners. It really was great. Those missiles were really big

Kim And long

Xi OK then. It's just that it's hurtful when people laugh at people's appearances. It's hard enough running a country without all the name-calling. People are crazy

Kim I'm not crazy

Putin I'm not crazy

Xi Not you. Trump. He's so difficult. All those upper case rants. All that talking about himself in the third person

Putin It's so dictatorial

Donald Trump WHAT'S SO DICTATORIAL?

Putin Nothing

Xi We were just saying how exhausting it is running a country

Trump COME ON, YOU LOSERS! THERE'S NOTHING TO IT. JUST FIRE ALL THE EXPERTS, SEND TROOPS TO YOUR CAPITAL AND, KERCHING, NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Kim Jr Daddy, I'm hungry. Have you got me my robot dog yet?

Kim Guys, do any of you know a good chef? Mine has just … quit

**As imagined by Matt Rudd*

Robert Colvile

Reeves can keep her pledges and voters, or break them and save the economy

Eleven more weeks. Eleven more bloody weeks. Apologies for the language. But it's a pretty accurate summary of market opinion after the chancellor's announcement that the forthcoming budget will be delayed all the way until November 26.

The timing by Rachel Reeves is the product of a cunning political strategy, frequently adopted by the previous government, known as "hoping something will turn up". In particular, hoping that global bond yields fall enough to ease the intense pressure on government borrowing costs — and by extension limit the scale of the tax rises that we all know are coming.

The obvious danger, however, is not only that the markets don't comply but that we get a repeat of last summer, when rampant uncertainty about precisely which taxes were going up, plus endless kite-flying in the papers about particularly gruesome proposals, led to businesses putting all kinds of hiring and investment decisions on hold and consumers keeping their wallets in their pockets. Indeed, Reeves's budget will come eight full months after Keir Starmer first set the hares running by refusing to rule out tax rises in the autumn.

To restate the bleeding obvious, it wasn't meant to be like this. Labour told us before the election that it could pay for all its plans. Then it told us that the tax rises last year were one and done. Now it's saying it needs more. Turns out it's pretty tricky to put spending up without paying for it. Who knew?

It was obvious before the election to anyone who could read a spreadsheet that Labour would have to put up taxes. But the party made things worse for itself not just by denying the fact, but by specifically promising that it would not raise any of the four biggest taxes: income tax, national insurance, corporation tax and VAT. Reeves pushed the limits of this promise by retaining the Tories' freeze on income tax thresholds (a tax rise on workers by any other name) and increasing the employer's component of national insurance (likewise). But now she's largely snookered.

The result, even more than last year, is that Labour is left trying to get large sums from small taxes. But the effect of that is to concentrate the pain in ways that people really notice, and object to. Treasury ministers can complain that all the mad briefings about wealth taxes, or taxing the sale of the family home, or VAT on puppies or whatever, aren't coming from them. But that raises the obvious rejoinder: so what are you thinking of taxing, then?

Looming over all this, of course, is the threat of the bond market. Ministers are right to say that the sharp increases in gilt yields — which dictate how much it costs to cover the interest on our truly mountainous volume of borrowing — are not their fault. But they're not not their fault, either. Ever since the mini-budget, lenders have been charging Britain more than similar countries have to pay. That sentiment has been entrenched by a sense in the markets that we aren't serious about spending restraint (look at the fiasco over the welfare reforms), controlling inflation (public sector pay rises) or generally getting our house in order.

Indeed, analysts have been highlighting the extent to which our inflation problem derives from government decisions: energy bills inflated by Ed Miliband's net zero policies, or the hikes in employer's wage costs inevitably being passed on to workers. And then there's the Bank of England's bizarre insistence on selling hundreds of billions of bonds created as part of its quantitative easing programme into a buyer's market.

The upshot — as Rupert Harrison, a former Tory adviser now working at the bond giant Pimco, wrote the other day — is that "investors now treat the UK as guilty until proven innocent".

> **Labour is trying to get large sums from small taxes. That concentrates the pain in ways people notice**

So where does it all end? Some of the more excitable figures on the right are predicting a full-on bond strike — debt servicing costs for the UK climb so high that we can't make the numbers add up, the IMF swoops in and it's Healey and Callaghan all over again.

That still seems unlikely. More likely is that the gilt market remains a constant, bleeding wound, putting pressure on the public finances, which leads to tax rises and speculation about tax rises, which leads to lower growth, which leads to pressure on the public finances and so on and so on (at least until someone, somewhere, makes the radical case to the British public that we can't actually afford to keep spending money we don't have).

On tax, similarly, the most obvious and least economically damaging solution — given Labour's allergy to cutting spending — would be for Reeves and Starmer to bite the bullet and break their pledge: to accept that if you want (or need) big money, you have to raise one of the big taxes.

This is certainly what many in the markets want: for the government to give itself enough headroom that it doesn't keep bumping up against the limits of its fiscal rules and we don't have to do this all again next year, and the year after that. But that would also represent a fundamental breach of faith with the electorate — and mean tearing whole pages out of Labour's manifesto.

In his big speech to Reform's party conference last week Nigel Farage didn't say much about the economy. Apart from one passing reference to the bond markets, he left the money stuff to that unlikely financial sage Nadine Dorries, who joined him on stage as the party's latest star defector.

But for all Reform's focus on migration — indeed, for all the wider farragos and fiascos that have assailed this government, Angela Rayner's failure to get decent tax advice very much included — it is issues of the economy and cost of living upon which governments live and die. That is why, amid the extraordinary game of musical chairs played over the past week, both within No 10 and around the cabinet table, it is the woman who didn't move who remains by far the most important to Starmer's future.

The economy may be able to cling on until the budget. But if Reeves can't square the circle on the public finances, things for this government — and for the country — will get even worse. No wonder Nigel is smiling quite so broadly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor should be sent to
letters@sunday-times.co.uk
The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

How to help our anxious teenagers

The "age of anxiety" confronting young people today did not suddenly materialise (News, Aug 31). Its roots are in the 2023 exam period, when GCSE and A-level students displayed record levels of distress. More than 60 per cent described themselves as overwhelmed and some reported self-harm, panic attacks or suicidal thoughts. Teachers have reported students leaving exam rooms in tears, and telephone helplines have had to deal with a significant increase in calls.

Universities reported all-time highs in the number of students in crisis in 2024. And by this year, according to surveys, one young adult in four was diagnosed with a mental health issue. The crisis has now overtaken pressures around exams. Young people say they are bombarded day and night with global news, money worries and even fears about having children because of climate change.

The pandemic has been blamed, and rightly so. Schooling was disrupted and resilience diminished systematically at critical points. But worry has lingered far, far longer than did lockdowns. High-stakes tests, social media pressures, economic uncertainty and climate anxiety continue to drive it. It is not a phase. What started in the exam halls of 2023 has escalated into a challenge for an entire generation. Reform and investment are needed, and young people need their issues to be taken seriously.
Michael Robinson
Gosport, Hants

Sir, Your finding that 34 per cent of girls aged 16 and 17 are struggling with anxiety is evidence of a mental health epidemic that shows no sign of abating. Our own research into "generation isolation" has shown that even younger children are struggling. The proportion of children aged 11 to 18 who report high or very high feelings of anxiety has averaged 49 per cent every year since 2022.

As was found in your focus groups, young people tell us that they want to put down their smartphones and stop wasting time on unsatisfying social media, but they don't know how to end their addiction.

Part of the solution lies in paying attention to what children themselves say works. Nine out of ten young people say that attending a youth centre makes a positive difference to their lives. Of those who attend OnSide Youth Zones, 88 per cent tell us that their attendance increases their ability to manage their feelings. The government must hear this message and ensure that its forthcoming National Youth Strategy increases access to aspirational, inspiring and affordable youth clubs that help build confidence, increase social interaction and give children back the chance to be children, in real life.
Jamie Masraff
Chief executive, OnSide

Sir, It is widely recognised that social media — where the fear of missing out, a gasping for "likes", poor body image and unkindness prevail — is a cause of the significant increase in anxiety among teenage girls. Schools work hard to manage this, but they cannot do it alone. Until the government works effectively with educators to agree on a robust solution, the shocking reality of the statistics outlined in your article will continue. This solution must be not about making a difference to the polls but about what is right for the next generation, and it must be a priority.
Samantha Price
Head teacher, Cranleigh School

Small boats suggestion

Dominic Lawson highlights (Comment, Aug 31) the frustration that many people feel about the small boats crisis. When the UK left the European Union we lost the power to return migrants to Europe using the Dublin convention.

The British public now see French vessels escorting migrant boats to the middle of the Channel, where they are met by Border Force and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution acting effectively as taxis. This is a big selling point for people smugglers and there is little risk for the migrants that they will fail to reach the UK. The French even demand life jackets back as the illegal migrants are "rescued".

The Italians, Greeks and Spanish do not routinely patrol the Mediterranean as we do the Channel. We should withdraw Border Force vessels closer to our shores to detain those who approach our coastline. This would create a dilemma for the French: prevent the boats from being launched or rescue the migrants themselves.

Many people now want a radical solution to this crisis. "One in, one out" will not cut it.
Ray Carver
Whitstable, Kent

Free speech on campus

Matthew Syed invites us (Comment, Aug 24) to "imagine a working-class kid starting at Oxbridge and expressing sympathy with the policies of Reform", risking ostracism by his peers. I was at Oxford from 1977 to 1980 when, under the "no-platforming" mantra, few dared to openly support Margaret Thatcher or espouse the Tory views that became policy throughout the 1980s. It appears that not much has changed.
George Davidson
Little Shelford, Cambs

Sticking power

Chris Haslam scoffs at fridge magnets (Travel, Aug 31), but I started my collection not to brag about where I had been but to stop my children (now in their forties) wasting money on holiday. Asked what I wanted them to bring me, I said magnets. When my children call, the magnets are a source of conversation.

So much pleasure from so little.
Celia Hayward
Corwen, Denbighshire

Majestic cheese

I agree with Charlotte Ivers on almost everything, but calling a burrata a non-event cannot be right (restaurant review, Magazine, Aug 31). A burrata is always an event.
Phoebe Humberstone
Nottingham

Misapplied shame

Sir, Your article "Mother and baby homes in England forced teenagers to give up their children" (News, Aug 31) is harrowing. That British governments as recently as 1964 were aware and complicit is shameful, as was the last government's refusal in 2023 to apologise.

Although an inadequate apology was offered by the Catholic Church in 2016 (nothing in your article hints at a similar offer from the Church of England), absolutely nothing has been or could be offered by way of explanation for the appalling treatment meted out to these frightened and vulnerable young mothers for the way they were shamed and exploited by those who managed and operated the mother and baby homes on behalf of the church. The depth of the hurt experienced over so many years by the victims of both churches is unfathomable.
Tony Adams
Deal, Kent

Sir, Blaming mother and baby homes for the forced adoptions of teenagers' babies overlooks the real source of pressure on these girls. The main pressure that was applied to remove the baby and the attendant shame came not from institutions but from the girls' own families.

Had the parents of these girls accepted and nurtured their own grandchildren, there would have been no need for institutional intervention.
Jan Manning
West Chiltington, W Sussex

Cycling safety paradox

Barbara Burford suggests making helmets compulsory for cyclists to improve road safety (letter, Aug 31). In Australia, which has that law, cycling accidents have increased per kilometre cycled. This has been attributed to "risk compensation": those wearing helmets feel more protected and inclined to take more risks, and motorists drive less carefully around them. The other effect of the law has been that the number of people cycling — which can help people to avoid heart disease and strokes — has fallen.
Chris Day
Marsh Baldon, Oxon

Pension unfairness

Sir, The pension triple lock is seen as an easy target, as in Johanna Noble's article (Money, Aug 31), but in the same edition you report that benefits can be more than the minimum wage (Tom Calver, Comment). The pension is less than half the minimum wage. Council tax and utilities take a big chunk, leaving little for rent. I would like to return to the UK, but my pension goes far further outside.
Jonathan Youens
Bucharest

AI chatbot friends

Sir, Kathleen Stock warns us (Aug 31) against believing that AI chatbots are sentient beings with whom we can build relationships, but I fear the genie is out of the bottle. In the not too distant past, yanking the plug out of my sat-nav before journey's end gave me a thrill, albeit tinged with guilt as it felt rude. Now I say: "Thank you, good night and maybe see you tomorrow." I believe we are bonding.
Alan Jones
Pewsey, Wilts

Degree of realism

Further to Roger Newark's letter (Aug 31) about errors by those constructing faux Downing Streets, I wonder if the zero on the mock door is at 37° anticlockwise, as it is on the door of the real No 10.
Max Denny
Lowestoft, Suffolk

Early bird special

Regarding pigeon coos (letters, Aug 17, 24 & 31), when I was a child my grandma told me the pigeons said: "Milk t'cow clean, Peggy." Obviously in this part of the world, they coo with a Yorkshire accent.
Malcolm Gudgeon
Little Ouseburn, N Yorks

Sir, Every morning in our house there is a bit of shoving to persuade my partner to make a cup of tea before we get up, always serenaded by the call: "Oh please, DO make tea. Oh please, DO make tea."
Isla Robert
Solihull, W Midlands

BIRTHDAYS

Elinor Barker, Olympic cyclist, 31
Chrissie Hynde, pictured, singer-songwriter, 74
Tim Levell, programme director, Times Radio, 57
Sir Ephraim Mirvis, chief rabbi, 69

ANNIVERSARIES

1497 Perkin Warbeck, pretender to the English throne, lands in Cornwall
1936 The last-known Tasmanian tiger, or thylacine, dies at Hobart Zoo

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

ipso. Regulated

Due to an editing error, an extract from a book by Sir Tim Berners-Lee misattributes comments to the author (Magazine today, page 17). The headline and paragraph stating that "AI is not going to come alive any more than your toaster will" was cited in the book as a quotation from a blog by Marc Andreessen. This does not represent Sir Tim's views and we apologise to him for the error.

In an article about downsizing and inheritance tax we wrongly said that the residence nil-rate band allowance of £175,000 per person in a couple is reduced by £2 for every £1 an estate is worth above £2 million. In fact it is removed at a rate of £1 for every £2 above £2 million, so that on estates worth more than £2.7 million no residence allowance applies (Money, Aug 31).

Complaints should be sent to complaints@sunday-times.co.uk or Complaints, The Sunday Times, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

Letters should be sent to ***letters@sunday-times.co.uk*** *and should arrive by midday on Thursday. We may edit letters, which must be exclusive*

The way we were

From The Sunday Times
September 7, 1925

Lamb delighted in the cloistral silence of deserted colleges

A century has passed since Charles Lamb penned his essay on the university he loved to visit. Oxford has changed little since those days. New buildings have arisen to add to the grey stone that has stood the test of centuries. But the empty stage where he could "here play the gentleman, enact the student", is unchanged. For Lamb, there was delight in the cloistral silence of the deserted colleges and in the leisured atmosphere that only Oxford knows. The gentle philosopher, whose life was a round of irksome confinement varied by domestic affliction, found healing in the classic dignity of her walls. Restoration is always being carried on in holes and corners of colleges. But it is so blended with the antiquity of hall and quadrangle that it is unnoticed. Balliol with its note of modernity is an exception and the chapel of Exeter College was not, in Lamb's day, a landmark. But of the other colleges, all save Hertford and Keble were in existence, and most presented the same appearance as today. It is still a pleasant thing to while away a few idle weeks at one of our ancient universities.

> **The philosopher found healing in the classic dignity of Oxford's walls**

● Parents have long discussed the momentous question as to whether or not their growing children are to be told "the facts of life". Parents of today are still faced with the problem but I think that modern conditions have modified the nature of this problem. It is now scarcely a question of whether children shall be enlightened; few intelligent children could retain for any length of time the ignorance that the Victorian era regarded as an essential of innocence. It has become a question of when and how and from whom a child's knowledge shall be acquired. If it is no longer practicable to prevent a child learning something of the nature of physical love, of marriage and of parenthood — of their obligations and consequences — it is still possible to postpone the day when it must learn that marital infidelities and sexual irregularities form nine-tenths of what adults call "humour".

● The best acting in the London Revue was by Mr John Kirby, from Australia. His taxi driver and boxing referee are marvels of characterisation. Anything more glorious than the baffled indignation of the untipped driver I have not seen for a long time. Next in excellence comes Mr George Carney, whose *Little Bath Street* is an item from his familiar music-hall turn. But Mr Carney is a considerable artist and to at least one spectator a perpetual joy. I do implore him to restore the old song that begins "What was the tale the colonel told the adjutant? What did the adjutant say to Major Brown?" He would set the huge audience humming and I can promise the management that they can be certain of one stall throughout the whole run.

Camilla Long

Rockin' Rayner was no working-class hero but a Middle England caricature of one

Yet more turmoil, then, for Labour. On Friday, after a scandal over her tax affairs, Keir Starmer finally sacked – no, wait. Of course he didn't sack her. He let Angela Rayner resign. He let her resign even though she'd avoided £40,000 of tax while loudly attacking "scum" Tory tax dodgers, and then sent his former deputy a long, handwritten – well, is it too much to call it a love letter?

"You have been a true friend for many years," he mooed. He was "sad" to see her go. He almost blamed himself: what was he thinking when he came into power and put the "strengthened system relating to ministerial conduct" in place?

I'll tell you what I was thinking: what was this gurgling Trot-tinged Mills & Boon cuddle-fest?

For days now we've been the victims of the worst kind of lying political soap opera. One that spins Rayner's regrettable, grasping tax avoidance into a piece of high Victorian sentiment. In it, poor, wronged little match girl Grangela is hounded to death by evil corporate bigots who hate the fact she is working class and a woman.

Only Sir Keir Starmer, champion of the poor, has been there to defend her. In the end, though, he couldn't help. His new system, put in place as part of a lavish virtue signal at the start of his government, was, like him, just too good. To me, though, it is all incredible.

For a start, what kind of leader congratulates himself on being both a staunch upholder of standards and someone who is too wet to sack someone when those standards are breached? What kind of leader needs someone else (Sir Laurie Magnus, who concluded Rayner had breached the ministerial code by not seeking appropriate tax advice) to tell him to get rid of a colleague, when it's been obvious since Tuesday she must go?

What kind of leader presides over a cloying love-in after such a shameful exit of someone he didn't even like that much? "A role model to millions," cooed Sadiq Khan. "Generations", said Ed Miliband, will be better off because of her "vision and leadership".

Will they?

I cannot get over the lies.

Even now they keep coming: Bridget Phillipson tells us Rayner "worked tirelessly" for working-class people. Did she? If you look at the achievements Rayner put in her self-justifying letter, they are in fact thin. A renters' rights bill that will kill the rental market, or at least hand it over to the control of corporate landlords. An electoral strategy that will give the vote to people who are too young to have it, and who will probably now vote Reform anyway. A housebuilding plan that is "not deliverable", thundered Kemi Badenoch over a year ago, and guess what – it isn't. Labour will, at best, build half the homes it promised (probably fewer now). All Rayner's policies will have the opposite effect of what they intended.

Hmmm. Having "the opposite effect of what they intended". If there is one thing that defines Starmer's staggering government, it is this. Stability, decency, maturity, competence – all promises made a year ago – have been replaced by a tainted prime minister sending a grovelling, weird letter to a disgraced colleague in child's handwriting, while boking out a tattered reshuffle. Everything we were told Labour cared about – paying tax, the NHS, family – has, in this one, pivotal scandal, now been proved to be lies. The NHS Rayner raved about, which saved her "miracle" baby – well, it was reported she sued it after the birth of the disabled child in 2008. She then, unspeakably, used his compensation money to facilitate a move to a party pad 260 miles away from where he lives.

We are told her private life is "complex" but, again, I think it is the opposite: if anything, it seems painfully simple. She has created an unholy mess for herself by trying to get away from it while dodging tax and pretending it was in her family's best interests. Where is the decency, the maturity in that? Where are the family values? Even Magnus syruped his letter with regret. Why?

Is it because everyone relentlessly treated Rayner herself like some special-needs child, a young, underprivileged woman who they secretly suspected couldn't read or write? If you look at the way Starmer spoke about her, it was constantly in these terms: she was a woman, and working class.

Angela Rayner was the perfect deputy for Sir Keir Starmer: a politician allowed to rise to the top on personality alone

Of her actual record, of course: no hint. She was the perfect deputy prime minister for him: a politician allowed to rise to the top on personality alone. And that personality was: middle-class person's idea of what a working-class person should be. Slobby, ribald, partying in 'Beefa – isn't vaping on inflatables what working-class people all do? Spoiler alert: it isn't. Most working-class people are insulted to be compared to her.

> **We are told her private life is 'complex', but if anything it seems painfully simple**

Labour's fatal assumption that Angela Rayner was the answer to its problems reveals its fundamental lack of connection with what is happening around it. It has built a party on a collection of vain fantasies – among them the idea that it is the ultimate antidote to Conservative vice and excess. This saintly arrogance has blinded it to the extreme difficulty of the task ahead of it, forcing Starmer again and again back onto the ropes. All he can do now, in his inability and indecision, and his clear dislike of the job, is appeal to popular emotion, laying on thick how misunderstood and unfortunate and worthy of pity a creature like Rayner is.

People flock to her myth because they want to believe it: now, everyone decides their emotional responses to figures in public life first. What happened to judging people on what they've actually done and said? But Rayner is only the beginning of end-times trouble for the government, and indeed us.

Farage tried to have me arrested for free speech

I was interested to see Nigel Farage in the US Congress, describing this country as "North Korea".

We've sunk into an "awful authoritarian state", he said, where people are getting arrested for "saying things online that the British government and British police don't like". It is his big new campaign: "Free speech is under assault in Britain."

Interesting.

Could this be the same Nigel Farage who in 2015 tried to get me, a journalist, arrested by Kent police for something I said? I'll never forget the day I got the call. I'd been joking on television about Farage's lacklustre campaign in South Thanet. "By the time I arrived he'd only been there a few times," I'd said.

The call was a journalist from another paper telling me Farage had complained this wasn't the case. Not for Nigel, though, a mere libel writ — I'd been reported under the Representation of the People Act 1983, which makes it a crime to spread false information about candidates.

For the first time in my experience of covering Ukip, I was scared. It felt menacing. I'd never even heard of the law they'd alighted on. Fortunately Kent police thought it was nonsense and that was that.

But when I now see the thin-skinned Farage saying we have become North Korea — it's not that I don't agree. It's just: does he realise he's as guilty as the rest of them? Biggin Hill's Kim Jong-un.

Tom Calver

Go figure

How much impact do migrants have on public services?

For a few short post-Brexit years, it looked as if Britain might have stopped worrying about immigration for good. Our "points-based" system was meant to attract the best and brightest from around the world, solving the problem of "mass, uncontrolled" immigration from the EU.

Four million arrivals later, the number of people who say immigration is the most important issue facing the country is as high as it was in June 2016, according to YouGov.

Objections to the cultural aspects of immigration, typified by flag-hoisting protests, have been obvious and angry. Yet polling by More in Common suggests that fears over immigration are more likely to be influenced by economic factors – public services, health, housing – than cultural problems like integration. But exactly how has the post-2021 "Boriswave" affected those services?

Measuring migration's impact on services – especially immediately after a pandemic – is difficult. What we do know is that asylum seekers, particularly small boat arrivals, are much more expensive to the state, per person, than those who come here by regular routes. Britain spent £4.3 billion in 2023 on asylum support, on top of any future benefit payments.

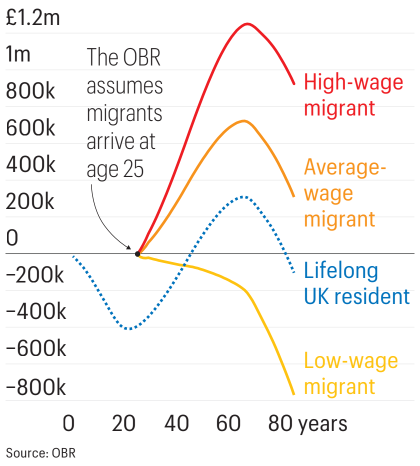
But small boat arrivals, and asylum seekers more widely, made up just 4 and 11 per cent of arrivals in 2024. The direct impact of recent immigration on social housing, for example, is minimal: only 2 per cent of new tenancies went to successful asylum seekers last year.

By contrast, the vast majority of migrants coming to Britain have no recourse to public funds and must wait at least five years to apply for indefinite leave to remain.

Let us try to put a number on all the above. By reducing the burden of people on the state to a single figure – "net fiscal impact" – the OBR calculates how much money migrants contribute over their lifetime to the Treasury. For most of us the contribution cycle goes like this. After birth we fall into negative territory, benefiting from the NHS and schooling, before paying back our "debt" in the form of taxes while working for 45 years. After retirement, our contribution falls again because of the state pension and greater use of the NHS.

Do migrants contribute?

Cumulative fiscal impact on UK economy of migrants over the course of their lifetime



Source: OBR

For migrants, though – whom the OBR assumes arrive aged 25 – that early debt to the state is skipped. If they are in a well-paid job, they contribute almost immediately through taxes.

Crucially, though, that contribution hinges entirely on earnings. Migrants on the average wage (about £37,000 for a full-time worker) contribute more to the public purse than UK-born workers because we don't have to pay for their early years. Yet someone consistently earning half that would have cost the state £582,000 by age 80. An asylum seeker not working, or working in a job that somehow facilitates not paying tax, could end up costing even more.

HMRC figures show that last year the average employed skilled visa-holder earned £56,600, making him or her a solid net contributor, while health and care visa-holders earned £30,900. But dependants, who represent about a quarter of arrivals, are paid less: working dependants of health visa-holders made just £22,100 a year, and plenty, including children, were not working at all.

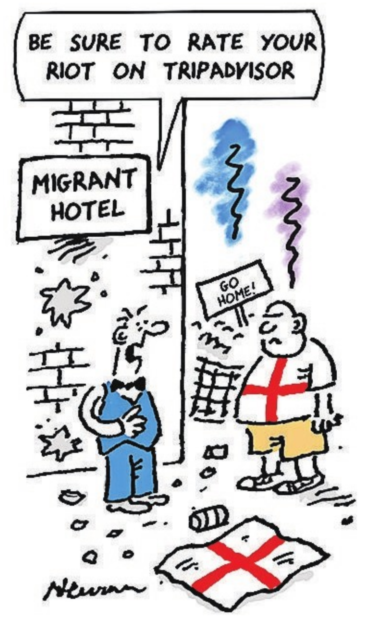
This is a simplification: it does not take into account the impact those migrants make on public services with their jobs (two in five new doctors were trained overseas), plus it ignores the fact that earnings increase over time.

But there is a bigger problem with looking at migration in this transactional way. The idea of a "net contribution" implies that migrants' taxes are reinvested in things that make their arrival less burdensome: more doctors, houses, police officers and so on. In reality that often doesn't happen. When the OBR tweaked its forecasts last year to take into account rising immigration, an extra £6.2 billion in tax revenue from migrants was not reallocated into public services or welfare budgets: it simply resulted in less government borrowing.

Since we voted to leave the EU, our population has grown by about 6 per cent. In that same period the number of full-time GPs has fallen by 5 per cent, and the number of local authority-funded homes is down by more than 2 per cent. Compared with the average European country, Britain is "missing" four million homes, according to the Centre for Cities.

Most new migrants seem to pay as much in tax as the average worker, if not more. Yet that does not help public services if governments do not reinvest that money to accommodate the growing population. Britain built an immigration system it was not prepared for: no wonder the country feels full.

NEWMAN'S VIEW


BE SURE TO RATE YOUR RIOT ON TRIPADVISOR
MIGRANT HOTEL
GO HOME!
Newman

Try something new for breakfast

Kate McCann and Stig Abell Monday to Thursday, 6-10am

Chloe Tilley and Calum Macdonald Friday to Sunday, 6-10am

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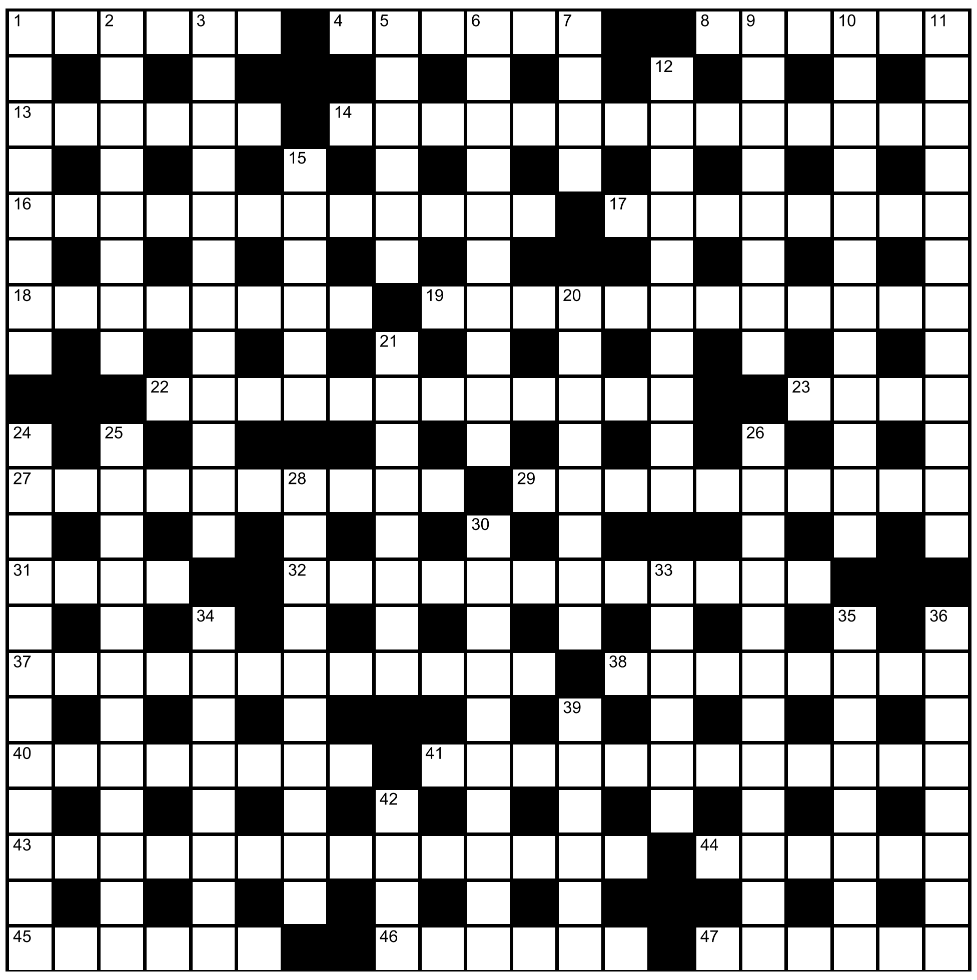
GENERAL KNOWLEDGE JUMBO CROSSWORD 491



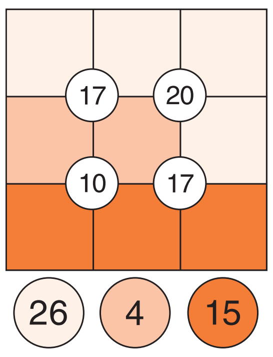
Across

1 Arboreal edentate mammals camouflaged by symbiotic green algae in their fur (6)
4 Gestures used famously by Winston Churchill and Harvey Smith, in different forms (1-5)
8 Parallel of latitude about 23.5 degrees north or south of the equator (6)
13 "I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ___" (Anne Bronte) (6)
14 "I only recently foud out that ___ was real, previously thinking he was just a theoretical physicist" (joke) (6,8)
16 Popular ornamental flowers, with a name said to be popularised in Coleridge's poem *The Keepsake* (6-2-4)
17 Term for someone given a share of something (8)
18 What may be measured with a pluviometer (8)
19 White crystalline substance also called quicklime (7,5)
22 American author who coined the term "catch-22" (6,6)
23 In law, "res ___ loquitur" means "the thing speaks for itself" (4)
27 Military officer acting as a senior officer's assistant (4-2-4)
29 Lioness who plays at right-back for Chelsea (4,6) (pictured)
31 Controversial meat, usually of male cattle (4)
32 Rivals of Blefuscudians in *Gulliver's Travels* (12)
37 Autumn ___ is the UK's last native orchid to flower (5-7)
38 1934 Rodgers and Hart ballad, Manchester City's anthem (4,4)
40 1990s BBC drama featuring the characters Anna, Egg, Ferdy, Miles, Milly and Warren (4,4)
41 The Princess of Wales chose this garden flower for her wedding bouquet in 2011 (5,7)
43 Actress who failed to land a role said to be based on herself in the film *Postcards from the Edge* (6,8)
44 The 1943 Dodecanese campaign was fought in this sea (6)
45 Elaborately decorated; flowery (6)
46 Lessening in degree; comforting (6)
47 Medically, a reduction in the flow of a bodily fluid (6)

Down

1 California university, often ranked in the top 10 worldwide (8)
2 "Tinkety tonk ___, and down with the Nazis" (Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in a wartime letter sign-off) (3,5)
3 Chamber in which Black Rod maintains order (5,2,5)
5 In hospitals, a solution of sodium chloride and water (6)
6 Marmaduke and Scooby-Doo, for example (5,5)
7 Home of an animal championed by Brian May (4)
9 An "effect" is named after this 1950 Kurosawa film in which a murder is described differently by four people (8)
10 Psychedelic Furs song used in a 1986 Brat Pack comedy film of the same name (6,2,4)
11 Opponents of the Yankees in the US Civil War (12)
12 Actor who played Dr Venkman in *Ghostbusters* (1984) (4,6)
15 French film that made Audrey Tautou a major star (6)
20 Branch of maths developed by Leibniz and Newton (8)
21 Old name for a slaughterhouse or meat market (8)
24 The film company ___s released *Avengers: Endgame* in 2019 (6,6)
25 Author of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (6,6)
26 ___, Duke of York later became George VI (6,6)
28 Sweet-smelling liquid formerly used as a general anaesthetic (10)
30 Golfer ranked world No 1 for 683 weeks, 1999-2014 (5,5)
33 English equivalent of "beaux-parents" in French (2-4)
34 Term for the Goliath-slaying David as a writer (8)
35 Evergreens such as the pine and spruce (8)
36 In Greek myth, these flowers were created by the mixing of Adonis' blood and Aphrodite's tears (8)
39 Location of the First World War's longest battle (6)
42 Ancient stringed instrument; a sheet-music holder used in marching bands (pictured) (4)

SUKO



Place the numbers 1 to 9 in the spaces so that the number in each circle is equal to the sum of the four surrounding spaces, and each colour total is correct.

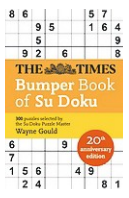
CELL BLOCKS

	8			4		
		4			4	5
			4	5		
	2					
3		3			2	
		2			3	

Divide the grid into square or rectangular blocks, each containing one digit only. Every block must contain the number of cells indicated by the digit inside it.

SUDOKU

Each row, column and 3x3 box must contain digits 1-9. Winner receives The Bumper Book of Sudoku, 20th anniversary edition, and two other Sudoku books.



Closes 23.59 on Saturday. UK & ROI, 18+ only. To enter, complete the Very Hard puzzle and call 0901 292 5275 (UK only) (ROI 1516 303 500), leaving your answer (the numbers in the three shaded squares) and contact details, OR text SUNDAY2, followed by a space, your answer (three numbers) and contact details — eg SUNDAY2 123 John Smith, etc — to 64343 (UK only), OR enter online at thetimes.com/puzzles/sudoku (Times subscription required) OR by post to Very Hard Sudoku, The Sunday Times, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex, CO2 8GZ. Calls cost £1 (ROI €1.50) plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your mobile network's access charge. Winners will be picked at random from all valid entries. When entering by phone or text, please provide your FULL name and address, as incomplete entries may be charged but not entered. Your information will be used to administer this promotion and otherwise in accordance with our privacy policy at newsprivacy.co.uk. Full Ts&Cs apply.

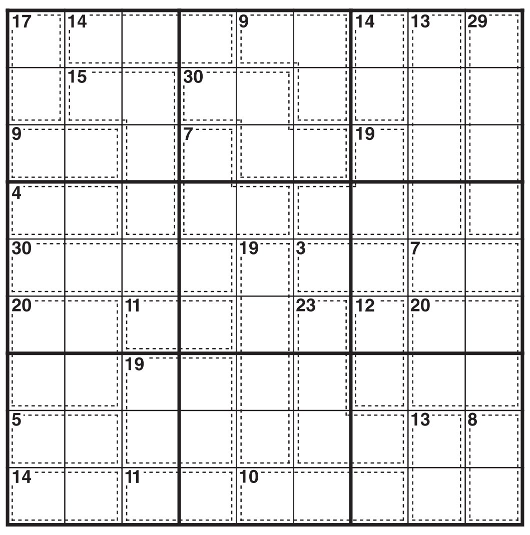
WARM-UP

9								
	1	5		3				6
		3			6	2		9
	5		8		9	6		
			3					7
	4		1		5	9		
		6			7	4		1
	8	9		1				2
7								

VERY HARD — PRIZE 1656

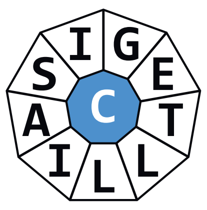
			8		5		7	
						2	4	
				4			6	8
4			▨		3		1	7
		2			1			
8			9	6				
	1							
3	2	4	1	▨			▨	5
		5	7				3	

KILLER SUDOKU MODERATE



Each row, column and 3x3 box must contain the digits 1 to 9. The digits within each group of cells joined by dotted lines must add up to the figure in the top-left-hand corner of each group. Within each dotted-line group, a digit cannot be repeated.

POLYGON

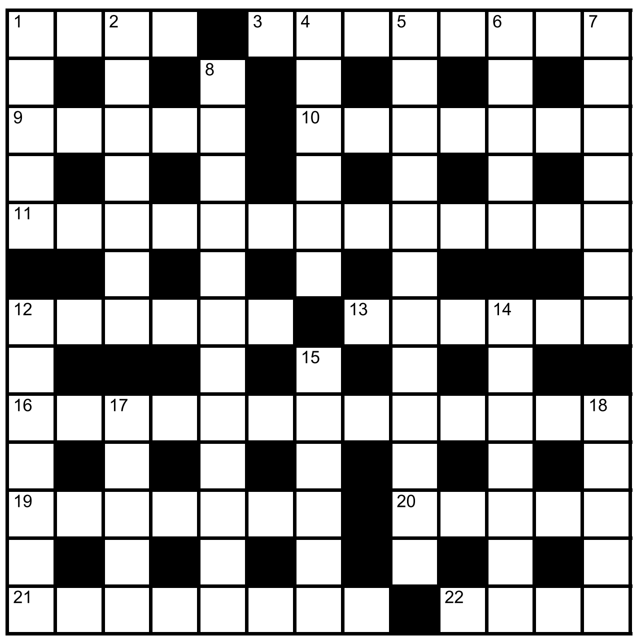


From these letters, make words of four or more letters, always including the central letter. Answers must be in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, excluding capitalised words, plurals, conjugated verbs (past tense etc), adverbs ending in LY, comparatives and superlatives.

How you rate
18 words, average; 25, good; 34, very good; 44, excellent.

STUCK? Call our clue line to get four clues for the Very Hard puzzle on 0901 293 6265 (ROI 1514 515 120). Calls cost £1 (ROI 76c) plus your telephone company's network access charge. For full terms and conditions, visit thetimes.co.uk/ts&cs/sudoku. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (ROI 0818 205 403) Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm

CONCISE CROSSWORD 1955



Across

1 Lose colour (4)
3 Battery type (4,4)
9 Chooser of mods (5)
10 Cassava grains (7)
11 Impetuosity (3-10)
12 Humorous (6)
13 Choice (6)
16 Intolerable (6,3,4)
19 Calm (7)
20 Wrong (5)
21 Proposes (8)
22 Tax (4)

Down

1 Showy (5)
2 Popular (7)
4 Cluttered (6)
5 Butterfly or moth (12)
6 Bring to mind (5)
7 Intermediary (7)
8 Irrational (12)
12 Unemployed (7)
14 Picture (7)
15 (Bear) witness (6)
17 Immature (5)
18 Dissertation (5)

TETONOR HARD

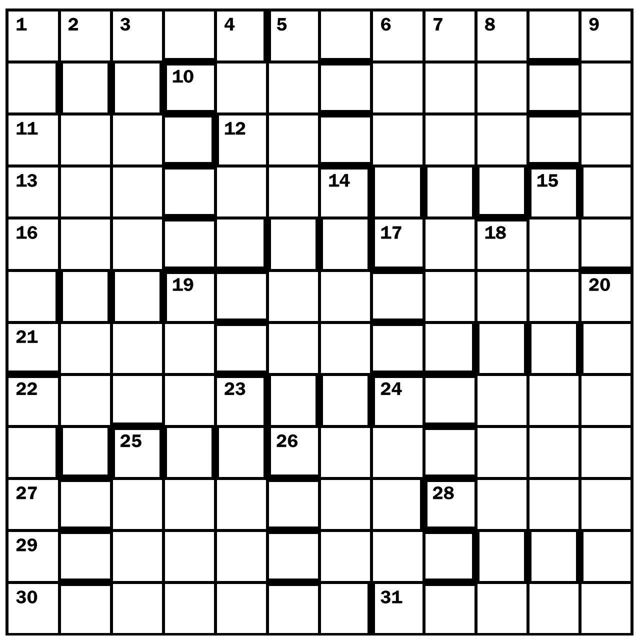
44	25	112	24
28	160	22	100
132	23	96	30
37	144	17	52

	2	2	4	5				12			16				

Each number in the main grid can be formed by adding or multiplying a pair of numbers in the strip below the grid. Each pair of numbers should be used twice: once as part of an addition and once as part of a multiplication. For example, a 10 and 24 in the main grid may be solved by the sums, 4 + 6 and 4 x 6, respectively. Enter each sum in the boxes below its answer. Any blanks in the strip must be deduced, bearing in mind the numbers are listed in ascending order.

MEPHISTO 3393

Paul McKenna



NAME ……………………………………………

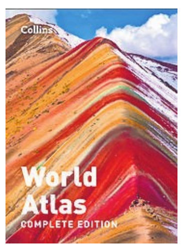
ADDRESS ……………………………………………

……………………………………………

Post your solution to The Sunday Times Mephisto 3393, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ, or email puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk

The first correct solution picked at random after next Saturday wins Collins World Atlas: Complete Edition, worth £30.The next four will receive £20 Waterstones gift vouchers. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

The Chambers Dictionary 13th edition is the primary reference. Readers may email comments or queries to Paul McKenna at paul.auctor@gmail.com



Across

1 Fruit loaf one moved to the front closer to panettone (5)
5 Quip by dear boxer (7)
10 Sword is blunt and left behind before discharge (9)
11 Obvious good in line? No, the opposite (4)
12 Again order stupid car reg, eh? (8)
13 A maiden over or duck likewise is sweet (7)
16 Sheep could be mine in outmost parts of territories (5)
17 50A plugs (5)
19 Point which secures company name in ships? (9, two words)
21 Like one nose-diving in poll and frequently about one stumped (9, two words)
22 Drove on large boat and impatience finally departs (5)
24 Fascinating woman is backing former career (5)
26 Fine, this impression could be attractive (7)
27 Drive, say, that is in Greece being more muddy (8)
28 Pulse varied as mean pair get removed (4)
29 Dance music station hosting second-rate fan? (9)
30 Jack holding parrot, I become known (7, two words)
31 Kites being good under control by son (5)

Down

1 Amateur club overlooking chestnut tree (7)
2 Fickle sort's extraordinarily clean home (9)
3 Okay, girl's revising radiologist's unit (8)
4 Well, street in Monaco put up what's perhaps blown there (5)
5 No longer limit key within singer's symbols (9)
6 Raising line, a Chinese military organisation for youths (5)
7 There's no independence in old plaintiff's shouting loudly (7)
8 Fit term for trench plough, as it used to be (4)
9 Fumes setting up fright in some places (5)
14 Ordinary poet admitting core of latest is to turn too far (9)
15 Aromatic box full of, I know, diamonds (9)
18 A grim era that's reconsidered the noose whimsically (8)
19 Forgotten scorn by unorthodox gens about Roman gods (7)
20 Scam turned up checking through Government's threads (7)
22 In the old way you kept both sides of dents in titfer (5)
23 A good wedge turned up hemp (5)
24 Attack mounting empty waffle about councillor (5)
25 English into drink that's upset prank (4)

CODEWORD

22	9	21	5	1	13	9	8	■	15	18	11	17
18	■	7	■	8	■	15	■	15	■	9	■	20
16	15	25	2	23	■	24	15	11	3	17	7	2
6	■	26	■	7	■	13	■	23	■	15	■	15
6	17	17	19	■	19	16	16	11	25	7	16	12
■	■	9	■	18	■	24	■	17	■	■	■	9
23	15	9	9	16	26	■	2	22 S	15	12	9	17
21	■	■	■	7	■	2	■	13	■	11	■	■
23	17	19	21	18	21	7	17	■	10	15	23	12
21	■	16	■	17	■	21	■	21	■	4	■	15
18	15	7	3	15 A	22	22	■	13	26	21	22	13
11	■	16	■	9	■	17	■	17	■	17	■	16
8	15	11	19	■	16	14	8	23	16	11	16	7

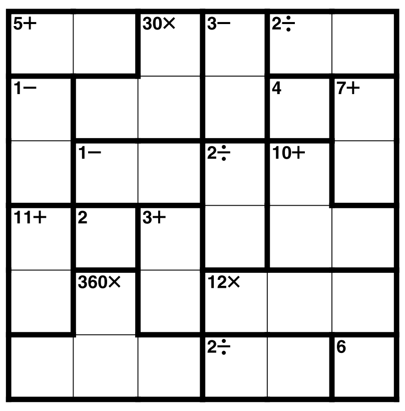
~~A~~ B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R ~~S~~ T U V W X Y Z

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 A	16	17	18	19	20	21	22 S	23	24	25	26

In the grid, each number represents a letter of the alphabet – all 26 letters are used. Use the initial clues in the code table to work out the rest of the code.

STUCK? To get four random extra letter clues, call 0901 293 6266 (ROI 1514 415128) or text STCLUE to 64343 (UK only). Calls cost £1 (ROI 75c) plus your telephone company's network access charge. Texts cost £1 plus your standard network charge. SP: Spoke, 0333 202 3390 (ROI 0818 205 403) (Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm).

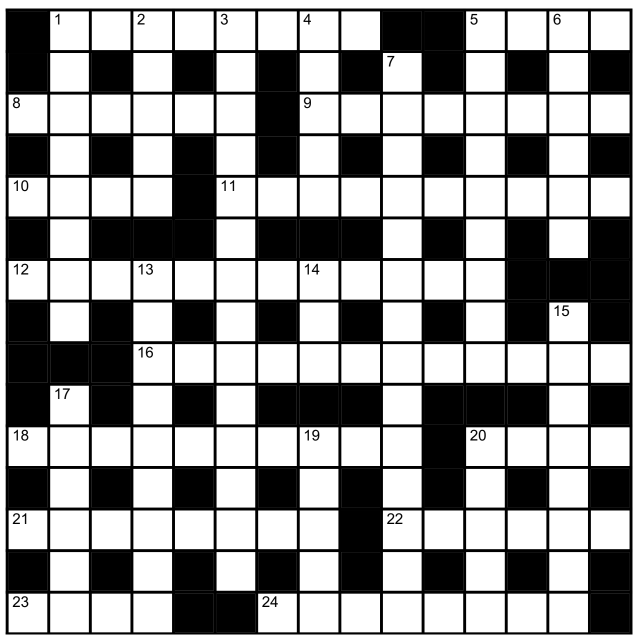
KENKEN



All the digits 1 to 6 must appear in every row and column. In each thick-line "block", the target number in the top left-hand corner is calculated from the digits in all the cells in the block, using the operation indicated by the symbol.

CROSSWORD 5180

David McLean



NAME ……………………………………………

ADDRESS ……………………………………………

……………………………………………

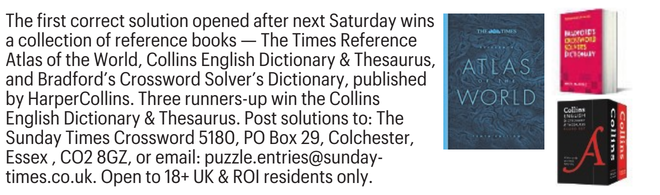
Across

1 Nut wrap and big cheese strip (8)
5 Switching starter, eat half of course? (4)
8 Turned fruit bishop brought to a relative (6)
9 Rook must get to King's file: find move (8)
10 Something that comes in turns for Reform? (4)
11 Jealous creep entertaining female high-flyer (10)
12 Anger with necktie getting tangled up in tongue (7,5)
16 Modern ward in Barking with restricted views (6-6)
18 Risk-taker seen in rare nude TV broadcast (10)
20 Killer from close to Cincinnati in US jail (4)
21 Blue upon blue in your heart of hearts (4,4)
22 Dozy type of kid making one amused … initially (6)
23 Sulphur, bitumen-like substance and lead (4)
24 Dope, elite officer at front admitted, is toxic stuff (8)

Down

1 President touring old place where bills have gone up (8)
2 A hit getting sent up has tenor in bits (5)
3 Writing group in boat teenager upset (4,10)
4 Bottle of note: present to customer unopened (5)
5 Why one might buy their eggs over the hill? (2,7)
6 Books covered in commendable literary review (6)
7 Hear ignoble men started up Apple (8,6)
13 Local manager hot to get new and handy footballer? (9)
14 Sentimentality is fine (most of the time) (3)
15 Desirable quality found in Essex housing essentially (8)
17 A daughter opening something prior to Christmas? (6)
19 Apparatus tackling, primarily, nuisance calls (5)
20 Get in trouble being sanctimonious in bed (3,2)

The first correct solution opened after next Saturday wins a collection of reference books — The Times Reference Atlas of the World, Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus, and Bradford's Crossword Solver's Dictionary, published by HarperCollins. Three runners-up win the Collins English Dictionary & Thesaurus. Post solutions to: The Sunday Times Crossword 5180, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex , CO2 8GZ, or email: puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.



CLUE WRITING CONTEST 2089: LORGNETTE

You are invited to write a clue for the word above, in our cryptic crossword style. The best entry selected after next Saturday wins a £25 Waterstones voucher. Email your entry to puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk.

Winner 2087: Dami Ekpe, London SW15
Iron horse: Subject for Trainspotting, primarily, is lead character of Renton on heroin

For a full report, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/cluewriting

Jeremy Clarkson

Brawls, bras and filthy bogs — what we poor pub landlords see

I was cheered by the heartwarming news last week that the Hollywood actor Rupert Everett has teamed up with about 30 other people from the village of Enford in Wiltshire in a bid to keep their local pub open. He was even photographed behind the bar, pulling pints.

I wish them all the very best, of course. But I've had a pub for a year now and I feel duty-bound to point out that behind the bucolic, thatched, "pint of best" image that undoubtedly lives in Rupert's head, running a pub is harder than eating one. It's harder than anything. Even farming.

Of course there are good days. My pub's called the Farmer's Dog and on a visit last week I sat in the garden, in the sunshine, with a pint of my own beer, chowing down on a pizza made with dough from my own farm, and it was rural perfection. There was a gaggle of little kids doing handstands and dogs lazing in the warmth and families enjoying the live band that serenades the customers on a Friday evening. I was bathed in a Ready Brek glow of absolute happiness.

However, Rupert should be aware that some aspects of pub ownership do cause a landlord's shoulders to sag a bit. And I'm not talking about the ludicrous taxes that publicans have to pay, or the difficulties of finding staff, or the issues with national insurance.

That's all common knowledge. I'm talking about the stuff that isn't. For example: a lady came to my pub recently and, after enjoying several glasses of our wonderful Hedgerow cider, had a stumble and then tripped over her hair extensions, which caused her to vomit explosively into her own cleavage. Rupert probably isn't ready for that situation, and he certainly won't be prepared for what happened next. She fished handfuls of the sick from her bra and then passed it to our manageress.

ANDREW FOX FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Clarkson behind the bar at the Farmer's Dog near Burford

Or how about this one? A little girl in the garden became a bit upset because a little boy from the next table had nicked one of the pine cones she was using to build a castle. History doesn't relate what happened next, but whatever it was, the two fathers decided that the only solution was to try to strangle each other.

And then there was the eight-year-old girl who locked the lavatory door and then panicked because she couldn't unlock it. This caused onlookers to visit our garden shed, find a crowbar and then lever the door off its hinges. It's now a splintered ruin in a skip, alongside the pub sign that someone reversed into the other day.

These are isolated incidents, but Rupert should be aware they do happen from time to time. What happens a lot more is visits from food intolerance enthusiasts who will claim after they left that you poisoned them and that you must now give them 50,000 of your pounds.

We had one the other day who said she'd been given beer instead of cider and the gluten in it had made her so ill she'd had to cancel her holiday and we now had to reimburse her. Happily, we have her on CCTV not drinking beer, so we are safe on that one. But often landlords aren't so lucky. Many tell me this food intolerance fraud is now an epidemic.

And even when it isn't fraudulent, it's still annoying, because these faddy eaters demand that the kitchen staff jump through hoops to ensure they will not be served anything that might upset them. And then they have an ice cream for pudding, saying, "Oh well, a little bit of dairy won't hurt." I'm seriously thinking of banning people with food intolerances. I know it would be commercial suicide but they are just so annoying.

I have to talk about lavatories at this point and ask why so many people plainly do not know how to use them. It baffles me because if you are sitting down to do a poo, how do you then miss the bowl? I don't know the answer because we don't have CCTV in the cubicles, but I do know that one day, after all the staff have left for the night, Rupert's going to check the loos in his pub and find that someone has pebbledashed the walls with a gallon of diarrhoea.

Oh, and he should also be aware that there's a man on TikTok who films himself urinating on the floor in pubs if he feels the beer is too expensive. I'd actually like to catch this guy as I'd very much like to kill him.

> **Food intolerance enthusiasts will claim that you poisoned them**

Now. Staff. Hmmm. I want to make it plain that the guys and girls who work at my pub are brilliant. Their ability to keep smiling when someone has just announced they're allergic to oxygen genuinely beggars belief and I love them all. Nearly.

Because occasionally you do get a wrong 'un. And then what do you do? Well, you have to be careful, because if you fire them, they will find a great-grandmother who was born in Uganda and, hey presto, they've got you on a racism rap. And then you're in a world of pain. You fire them for being a wastrel and they accuse you of being a racist. So you lose.

Still, the subsequent unpleasantness will at least take your mind off the cooking oil that was nicked from your kitchen last night, and the missive from the building inspector saying you've got to spend £1 million on new fire escapes that the planners won't let you have.

This is why one pub in the UK is closing every day at the moment. It's hard enough dealing with all the vomit and the faeces and the fights, but when you factor in the local authority, and taxation, and the government's exciting new laws on workers' rights, it becomes nigh-on impossible to stay sane.

Oh, and how's this for an ending? We were hacked at the Farmer's Dog last week and swindled out of £27,000.

TEASER 3285

Bernardo Recamán

Daughters' Ages

"How old are your five daughters?" Ignacio asked me.

"Considering their ages as whole numbers, they are all under 20, some of them are the same, and they add up to a prime number," I answered. "Also, if you were to choose any two of them, no matter which two, their ages would have a common divisor greater than 1."

"I can't work out how old they are," complained Ignacio.

"And you still couldn't even if I told you the sum of all the ages. However, if I told you how old the youngest and oldest are, then you would be able to work out all the ages," I responded.

"That's great, because I now know how old all your daughters are!" Ignacio joyfully said after a pause.

In increasing order, what are the five ages?

Send your solution to: The Sunday Times Teaser 3285, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ or email puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. The first two correct solutions opened after next Saturday each win a £20 Waterstones voucher. Open to 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

CHESS

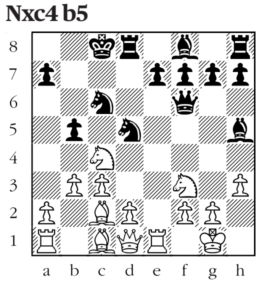
David Howell

Opening preparation begins long before move one – in books, databases and cloud engines. The aim is not necessarily to uncork a brilliancy on move 25. Instead, the goal is to reach a position you have already stress-tested at home. In practical terms: save time on the clock, steer to structures you enjoy, while avoiding walking into the opponent's homework.

There have been many classic examples over the years. From Kasparov unleashing a stunning rook sacrifice against Anand in their 1995 world championship match to later being outfoxed himself by Kramnik in 2000, as he repeatedly ran into the Berlin Wall. Clever prep decides titles and rewrites fashion.

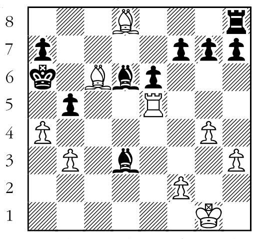
White: Aydin Suleymanli
Black: Murali Karthikeyan
FIDE Grand Swiss, Samarkand 2025
Alapin Sicilia

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 c3 Nf6 4 e5 Nd5 5 Bc4 Nb6 6 Bb3 c4 7 Bc2 d6 8 exd6 Qxd6 9 0-0 Bg4 10 h3 Bh5 11 Re1 0-0-0 12 Na3 Qf6 13 b3 Nd5 This variation holds a good reputation for Black. Which makes what follows even more shocking. **14 Nxc4 b5**



Suleymanli now plays a novelty – a move that has never been seen before. **15 Nb2!** This queen sacrifice looks bizarre, but it baits Karthikeyan into exposing his king. **15...Nxc3 16 dxc3 Rxd1 17 Bxd1 e6 18 g4 Bg6?** The most natural move ... and a game-losing blunder. **19 Bg5 Qxc3 20 Rc1 Qxb2 21 Rxc6+ Kb7 22 Ne5 Qxe5** A sad decision. 22...f6 walks into 23 Bf3! fxe5 24 Rc2+ with a deadly discovered check. **23 Rxe5 Kxc6 24 Bf3+ Kb6 25 Bd8+** White's attack continues into the endgame. **25...Ka6 26 a4 Bd3** Or 26...bxa4 27 Ra5 mate. **27 Bc6 Bc5** The only way to prolong the game, but Black will lose a piece. See today's Spot the Move puzzle for 27...Bd6. **28 axb5+ Bxb5 29 Rxc5 Rxd8 30 Bxb5+ Kb6 31 b4 a5 32 Ba4 axb4 33 Rb5+ Kc7 34 Rxb4 Rd5 35 Rf4 f5 36 Bb3 Re5 37 gxf5 exf5 38 Bg8 g6 39 Bxh7 Re7 40 Rh4 Black resigns**

Spot the Move 1496:
White to play.



Variation from Suleymanli-Karthikeyan, Samarkand 2025. Which winning move had Suleymanli planned?

Send your solution (first move only), to Sunday Times Spot the Move 1496, The Sunday Times, PO Box 29, Colchester, Essex CO2 8GZ, or email to puzzle.entries@sunday-times.co.uk. The first correct answer drawn after next Saturday wins a £20 Waterstones voucher. 18+ UK & ROI residents only.

BRIDGE

Sally Brock

A key part of the expert game is how to get away with murder when you are in a virtually no-play contract. Here is a good example from Poznan:

Both vulnerable, Dealer South

```
              ♠ Q J
              ♥ J 8 5
              ♦ K Q 3
              ♣ K 7 4 3 2
♠ A 8 6 3                ♠ K 10 7 4 2
♥ K 10 9 7 2      N      ♥ 6
♦ 7 4          W     E   ♦ 9 8 6 5 2
♣ A J             S      ♣ 8 5
              ♠ 9 5
              ♥ A Q 4 3
              ♦ A J 10
              ♣ Q 10 9 6
```

In one room the final contract was three spades by East-West.

West	North	East	South
			1♣
1♥	1♠	Dble	1NT
2♠	3♣	Pass	Pass
3♠	All Pass		

North's one spade denied spades and East was persuaded by his good distribution into showing his spade suit. On a diamond lead, the friendly lie allowed declarer to make his nine tricks. As there is no game on for North-South despite their 25 high-card points this did not necessarily look like a good result for East-West.

In the other room, North-South bid more strongly.

West	North	East	South
			1♣
1♥	1♠	Pass	1NT
Pass	2♥	Pass	2NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

Here also one spade denied spades, but East thought she was not strong enough to double one spade, so that suit was unbid. No doubt influenced by East not doubling one spade, West led the ten of hearts. Realising that when she knocked out the ace of clubs, East-West would surely find the spade switch, declarer – the Italian Irene Baroni – won trick one (in tempo) with the ace of hearts. She now played the ten of clubs which West won with the ace, and continued hearts, "knowing" that partner had the queen and wanting to keep the ace of spades as an entry to cash the hearts. He was not amused when declarer won the queen of hearts and proceeded to cash seven more tricks.

Last week's problem

```
              ♠ K 9 7
              ♥ Q 10 9
              ♦ Q 5 4 3
              ♣ J 8 7
♠ Q 8 3 2                ♠ J 10 6 5
♥ 8 7             N      ♥ K J 6
♦ J 10 7       W     E   ♦ A K 6
♣ Q 10 9 4        S      ♣ 5 3 2
              ♠ A 4
              ♥ A 5 4 3 2
              ♦ 9 8 2
              ♣ A K 6
```

North raises South's 15-17 1NT opening to 2NT, but South passes. West leads the two of spades won by declarer's ace. Declarer then plays a heart to the ten. Plan the defence.

If you win the jack of hearts, declarer will surely win the return in dummy and run the queen of hearts picking up your king and must come to at least eight tricks. Try winning the KING of hearts. Now declarer "knows" West has the jack, and he might cross to hand and play a heart to the nine. Now he must go tumbling down.

LAST WEEK'S SOLUTIONS

SUDOKU WARM-UP

6	8	4	3	9	7	5	1	2
9	2	7	1	5	6	4	3	8
3	5	1	4	8	2	9	7	6
5	6	3	9	1	4	8	2	7
1	4	9	2	7	8	3	6	5
8	7	2	5	6	3	1	4	9
7	9	6	8	3	1	2	5	4
4	1	8	7	2	5	6	9	3
2	3	5	6	4	9	7	8	1

CODEWORD

O	X	L	I	P	■	P	■	F	O	C	U	S
K	■	E	■	U	V	U	L	A	■	H	■	L
A	L	A	R	M	■	P	■	C	R	A	Z	E
P	■	S	■	A	G	A	P	E	■	I	■	E
I	D	E	A	■	R	■	R	■	D	R	I	P
■	I	■	P	L	A	T	E	A	U	■	N	■
S	T	O	P	■	N	■	Q	■	V	I	C	E
■	T	■	L	E	I	S	U	R	E	■	U	■
J	O	E	Y	■	T	■	E	■	T	E	S	T
O	■	L	■	B	E	L	L	Y	■	R	■	H
K	E	F	I	R	■	I	■	O	L	I	V	E
E	■	I	■	A	G	L	O	W	■	C	■	F
R	U	N	N	Y	■	Y	■	L	E	A	S	T

SUDOKU 1655

6	5	7	4	2	**9**	**3**	1	8
2	9	3	6	1	**8**	4	**7**	5
8	1	4	3	7	**5**	**9**	**2**	**6**
5	6	**1**	9	4	2	7	8	**3**
3	7	8	**5**	6	**1**	2	4	**9**
9	4	2	8	3	7	**6**	5	**1**
7	**8**	**6**	**2**	5	3	1	9	4
4	**2**	5	**1**	9	6	8	3	7
1	3	**9**	**7**	8	4	5	6	2

KENKEN

6× 1	6	1– 4	3	7+ 2	5
6 6	15+ 3	4– 1	5	2÷ 4	2
2÷ 4	5	6	2÷ 2	1	1– 3
2	1	8+ 5	2÷ 6	3	4
3– 5	2	3	2– 4	6	5– 1
1– 3	4	2÷ 2	1	5 5	6

KILLER SUDOKU

7	1	4	9	2	8	6	3	5
6	2	5	4	3	7	9	8	1
3	9	8	1	6	5	7	2	4
4	7	3	2	5	9	8	1	6
2	6	1	7	8	4	3	5	9
8	5	9	3	1	6	2	4	7
5	4	6	8	9	3	1	7	2
1	3	7	6	4	2	5	9	8
9	8	2	5	7	1	4	6	3

TETONOR

140	84	29	154
70 x 2	28 x 3	26 + 3	14 x 11
94	23	198	72
92 + 2	10 + 13	33 x 6	70 + 2
25	184	27	31
11 + 14	2 x 92	8 + 19	28 + 3
130	78	39	152
10 x 13	3 x 26	6 + 33	19 x 8

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE JUMBO CROSSWORD 490

Across: 1 Murray, **5** Michael Collins, **12** Wassily Kandinsky, **13** TGWU, **14** Spey, **15** Open stage, **16** Porous, **17** Airbus, **19** Chalk grassland, **21** Mid Glamorgan, **23** As one man, **25** Edward Hyde, **27** Dumbstruck, **29** Resettle, **31** Tim McInnerny, **33** Bourne Identity, **36** Taylor, **37** Henman, **38** Sharp-eyed, **40** Watt, **41** Brut, **42** Teething troubles, **43** Thomas Traddles, **44** Norrie
Down: 2 Unamplified, **3** Rusty, **4** Yellow Sea, **5** McKee, **6** Canasta, **7** Animal kingdom, **8** Lisle, **9** Olympus Mons, **10** Lateral, **11** New Guinea, **18** Big name, **19** Crop yield, **20** Real McCoy, **22** Great unwashed, **24** Ebriety, **26** Dotted notes, **28** Condottieri, **30** Ego search, **32** Noted down, **34** Ramstam, **35** Impanel, **38** Spear, **39** Yates, **40** Weber

MEPHISTO 3392

Across: 1 Suction stop, **9** Haul, **11** Giga, **12** Muftat, **13** Obas, **14** Offcut, **15** Tartuffian, **17** Unifilar, **20** Ninja, **21** Obama, **23** Ganglion, **25** Backstairs, **27** Torous, **30** Smit, **31** Somoni, **32** Cham, **33** As if, **34** Kulturkampf
Down: 1 Shooting stick, **2** Cumarin, **3** Infaunal, **4** Otto, **5** Nyaff, **6** Tincal, **7** Ogpu, **8** Pastoral staff, **10** Albania, **16** Finis, **18** Footwork, **19** Amorini, **22** Animism, **24** Narial, **26** Kuo-yu, **28** Oahu, **29** Smur

CROSSWORD 5179

Across: 1 Vision, **4** Chip shop, **9** Neuron, **10** Juvenile, **12** Underdone, **13** Sheer, **14** Scorpion fish, **18** Mountain goat, **21** Aping, **22** Hydraulic, **24** Road maps, **25** Stroll, **26** Browning, **27** Batter
Down: 1 Vanquish, **2** Soundbox, **3** Odour, **5** House of cards, **6** Presses on, **7** Heifer, **8** Poetry, **11** Go down the pan, **15** Ploughman, **16** Goalpost, **17** Stickler, **19** Zagreb, **20** Mikado, **23** Antra

SPOT THE MOVE 1495

1 Rf8+! wins: 1...Rxf8 2 Qxe6+

TEASER 3284

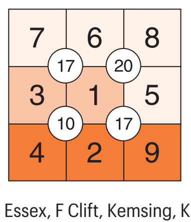
239

CONCISE CROSSWORD 1954

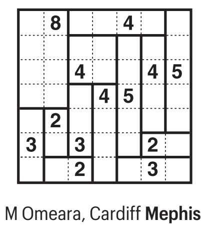
Across: 1 Fuji, **4** Emporium, **8** Carpet, **9** Litany, **10** Kilowatt hour, **12** Despot, **14** Voiced, **15** Bouquet garni, **18** Prefab, **20** Accost, **21** Cozenage, **22** Yolk
Down: 2 Umami, **3** Impromptu, **4** Extract, **5** Pilot, **6** Rut, **7** Unnerve, **11** Oligarchy, **13** Embargo, **14** Vitiate, **16** Umbra, **17** Nasal, **19** Fee

TODAY'S SOLUTIONS

SUKO



CELL BLOCKS



POLYGON

cage, call, case, cast, caste, castle, ceil, cell, cella, cellist, celt, ciliate, cill, cist, cite, clast, cleat, cleg, éclat, elastic, elicit, glacé, glacis, ictal, ileac, iliac, italic, lace, laic, laicise, **legalistic**, licit, lilac, scag, scale, scat, scilla, sect, sice, silica, silicate, slice, talc, telic

Winners Crossword 5178 J Whitmarsh, Linton, Kent, N Chick, Maldon, Essex, F Clift, Kemsing, Kent, M Omeara, Cardiff **Mephisto 3391** E Knox, Harrow, Greater London, D Crooks, Milngavie, East Dunbartonshire, J Doran, Birmingham, D Forster, Knowle, West Midlands, C Harker, Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire **Teaser 3283** M Carter, London W6, J Martis, Hamilton, South Lanarkshire **Chess 1494** M Radcliffe, London SW11 **Sudoku 1654** J Buchan, Ellon, Aberdeenshire

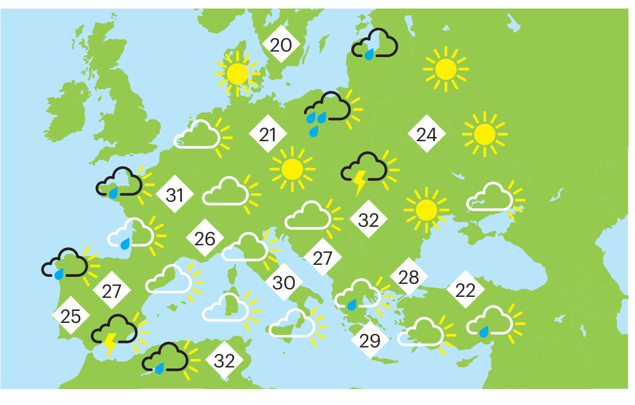
WEATHER

AROUND THE WORLD

Amsterdam	28C	f	**London**	24C	f
Athens	30	s	**Los Angeles**	33	s
Auckland	15	sh	**Madrid**	33	f
Bangkok	30	th	**Mexico City**	23	sh
Barcelona	29	f	**Miami**	32	th
Beijing	30	f	**Moscow**	23	f
Belgrade	31	s	**Nairobi**	26	sh
Berlin	23	s	**New Delhi**	34	th
Bogota	17	sh	**New Orleans**	33	f
Boston	16	sh	**New York**	20	sh
Brussels	31	f	**Oslo**	21	s
Budapest	27	s	**Panama**	26	th
Buenos Aires	15	f	**Paris**	29	f
Cairo	36	s	**Prague**	22	s
Calgary	29	sh	**Rio de Janeiro**	20	sh
Cape Town	18	f	**Rome**	32	s
Caracas	25	th	**San Francisco**	20	s
Casablanca	30	f	**Santiago**	20	sh
Chicago	20	s	**Seoul**	28	f
Dubai	34	s	**Seychelles**	25	f
Dublin	20	sh	**Singapore**	28	th
Geneva	27	s	**Stockholm**	23	f
Gibraltar	36	f	**Sydney**	22	f
Guatemala	25	th	**Tel Aviv**	29	f
Helsinki	20	sh	**Tenerife**	25	f
Hong Kong	29	th	**Tokyo**	32	s
Istanbul	26	sh	**Toronto**	19	sh
Jersey	21	sh	**Trinidad**	30	th
Johannesburg	26	f	**Tunis**	39	f
La Paz	13	th	**Venice**	26	f
Lagos	26	f	**Vienna**	25	s
Lima	19	f	**Warsaw**	20	f
Lisbon	26	sh	**Washington DC**	23	sh

Key c=cloud, dr=drizzle, ds=dust storm, f=fair, fg=fog, g=gales, h=hail, m=mist, r=rain, sh=showers, sl=sleet, sn=snow, s=sun, th=thunder, w=windy

EUROPE



- Eastern Spain will be mainly dry with the low risk of isolated thunderstorms, but thicker cloud and patchy rain will spread from northwestern Iberia to western France
- It will be dry with sunny spells across the Balearics, Italy, Sicily and Sardinia
- Staying dry across much of Greece and the Balkans, but climbing temperatures will trigger a few potentially heavy showers during the afternoon
- Fine and dry with sunny spells turning hazy across Germany, the Low Countries, Denmark and the Alps
- A misty start across Poland, the Baltic States and parts of Scandinavia where cloud will lead to outbreaks of rain

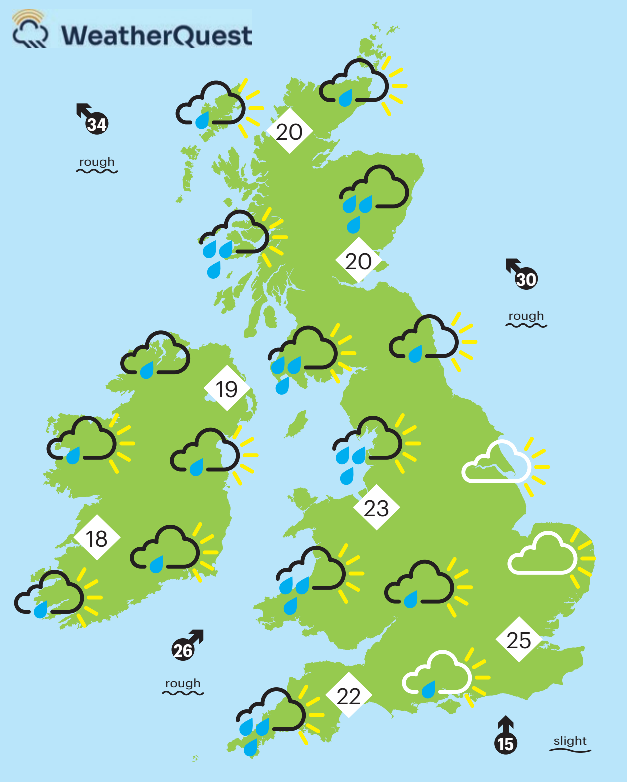
SUN, STREETLIGHTS & MOON

	Sun rises	Sun sets/ lights on	Lights off	Moon rises	Moon sets
Aberdeen	06:23	19:49	06:25	19:45	07:13(Mon)
Belfast	06:42	20:00	06:44	19:57	07:31(Mon)
Birmingham	06:29	19:41	06:30	19:38	07:15(Mon)
Bristol	06:33	19:43	06:34	19:40	07:18(Mon)
Cardiff	06:35	19:45	06:37	19:42	07:21(Mon)
Cork	06:56	20:07	06:57	20:04	07:43(Mon)
Dublin	06:45	20:00	06:47	19:57	07:33(Mon)
Glasgow	06:34	19:55	06:36	19:52	07:23(Mon)
London	06:23	19:33	06:24	19:30	07:08(Mon)
Manchester	06:29	19:44	06:31	19:41	07:15(Mon)
Newcastle	06:24	19:43	06:26	19:40	07:12(Mon)
Norwich	06:16	19:29	06:17	19:26	07:01(Mon)
Plymouth	06:40	19:48	06:42	19:45	07:25(Mon)

NIGHT SKY

Britain sees the end of a total lunar eclipse this evening. The **moon** is covered by the **umbra**, the dark central shadow of the Earth, between 6.31pm and 7.53pm, but rises in the E only near the end of this period. It is 10 degrees high in the ESE at 8.56pm, when it finally leaves the umbra. **Saturn** lies to the moon's left and is just below-right of it tomorrow. *Alan Pickup*

TODAY'S WEATHER



UK and Ireland forecast

An unsettled day for much of the British Isles with bright intervals and frequent outbreaks of rain and showers, heaviest and most widespread across Ireland and western Scotland through the morning. Largely dry and warm with the best of the sunshine in eastern England. Moderate to fresh south to southeasterly winds, turning strong in northern areas by the afternoon

REGIONAL FORECASTS

London, SE England
A dry day with sunny intervals. Fresh southeasterly winds. Max 25C. Clear spells and a few showers. Min 10C

Midlands, E England
Mainly dry with isolated showers. Light to moderate southeasterly winds. Max 25C. Dry and clear. Min 10C

Channel Is, SW and Cent S England, S Wales
Bright intervals and heavy rain. Moderate to strong southerly winds. Max 22C. Clear periods and the odd shower. Min 9C

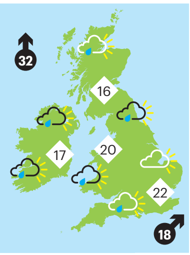
N Wales, NW England, Isle of Man
Patchy cloud and showery rain. Light to moderate southeasterly winds. Max 23C. One or two showers. Min 10C

Cent N and NE England
Bright periods and a few spots of rain. Moderate to fresh southeasterly winds. Max 22C. Cloudy with drizzle. Min 9C

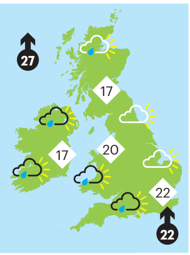
Scotland
Cloudy with outbreaks of rain. Strong southeasterly winds. Max 20C. Clear intervals and spells of rain. Min 8C

N Ireland, Republic of Ireland
Bright periods and frequent showers. Strong south to southeasterly winds. Max 19C. Scattered showers. Min 8C

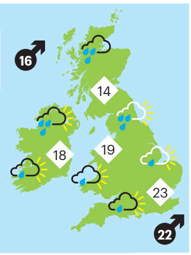
THE WEEK AHEAD



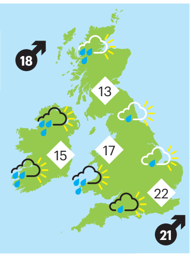
Monday
Scattered showers, most frequent further west.
Max 22C



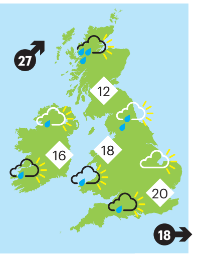
Tuesday
Thick cloud and rain spreading east during the day.
Max 22C



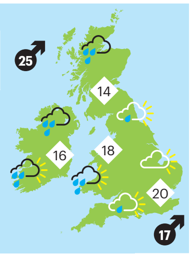
Wednesday
A showery day with blustery winds at times.
Max 23C



Thursday
Early rain clearing eastern areas with showers following.
Max 22C



Friday
Sunshine and showers. Driest further southeast.
Max 20C



Saturday
Another showery day across the north and west.
Max 20C

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September 7, 2025

UNDAY TIMES

thetimes.com/sport

SPORT

SPORT NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

2
0
ENGLAND
ANDORRA

CARL RECINE/GETTY IMAGES

2 Goals 1 Win 0 Thrills

Tuchel's England get the job done but fail to turn on the style against team ranked 174th in the world

pages 2-3

Declan Rice celebrates scoring England's second goal at Villa Park, a header from a superb Reece James cross

United's Onana close to Turkey loan move

Paul Joyce
Northern Football Correspondent

The Turkish side Trabzonspor are closing in on the loan signing of the Manchester United goalkeeper André Onana, which could hasten the end of his Old Trafford career.

Onana, left, has featured only once for Ruben Amorim's side this season, when he made errors during a humiliating Carabao Cup defeat by League Two side Grimsby Town.

The 29-year-old Cameroon international, who began the campaign nursing a hamstring injury, was signed from Inter Milan for £47.2million in the summer of 2023, but his time in England has been littered with mistakes and periods of poor form.

Trabzonspor have been searching for a new goalkeeper since selling Ugurcan Cakir to Galatasaray for a fee that could reach €36million (about £31million).

The completion of a deal for Onana before the Turkish transfer deadline on September 12 would leave United with a big decision to make regarding who will be their No1 before the Manchester derby against neighbours City in the Premier League next Sunday.

United recruited Senne Lammens, 23, from Royal Antwerp last week in an £18.2million deal but have suggested he is a player for the future. Altay Bayindir, who joined United from Fenerbahce in the same summer as Onana, to much less fanfare, has started all three of their Premier League games this season, but has looked far from convincing at times.

The uncertainty in such a crucial position has served to complicate United's start to the season. They were linked with a loan move for Aston Villa's Emiliano Martínez, but that never materialised.

Amorim's side have won one of their four matches this season, a 3-2 success against Burnley that was sealed by a Bruno Fernandes penalty deep into second-half stoppage time.

Concussion and me

'If I closed my eyes I'd fall over' – George North on how he feared for his health and career

pages 10-11

Life after Levy

• Martin Samuel

Are we really meant to believe the fun times start now for Spurs?

pages 4-5

• Simon Jordan

The truth of what it's like to do a deal with the ex-Tottenham chairman

page 6

• Red Roses rampant

England beat Australia 47-7 to top their Rugby World Cup pool

pages 12-13

BETTER, YES . . . BUT SPEED

2-0

England	**Andorra**
García (og) 25 Rice 67	

JONATHAN NORTHCROFT

Football Correspondent
At Villa Park

Some ski resorts, three towns and a bit of duty-free shopping. Your boys took a hell of a beating. On to Belgrade. The lions have roared.

OK, so we exaggerate – a laborious 2-0 win against the team ranked 174th in the world would ordinarily be a concern, but for England it actually felt a relief. It's something to build on, and after their disaster in the June internationals Thomas Tuchel and his aspiring World Cup winners badly needed that.

This wasn't a bad performance, but it wasn't a good one either – just an earnest, unspectacular exercise in putting a small but incredibly resilient opponent away.

The almost empty stadium when England did their lap of honour round Villa Park told one story, but the absence of booing or paper aeroplanes (for the first time in Tuchel's reign) told another. The fans were on the fence and real judgment will come when the Three Lions play their toughest game of qualifying, away to Serbia on Tuesday.

A step-up in performance will be required there, and Tuchel seemed to be contemplating just that while he sat pensively on a water bottle trunk throughout most of the second half.

He had promised we'd see more hallmarks of the football he wants to stamp upon England and we did, in the form of quicker passing, better pressing, penetration from wide. But only sporadically. At other times, England's energy and confidence dropped and they were dangerously becalmed.

The winners and losers? Well, maybe Tuchel has found a No6. On debut Elliot Anderson was outstanding in how crisply he moved the ball and how tenaciously he won it back, though caution is required. He was playing against semi-pros and will need to show he can reprise those qualities against much superior opposition, but this was a fine start to his international career.

"Just a very, very good football player. He has physicality, loves passing, very mobile. It was a pleasure to see," Tuchel said.

Noni Madueke was excellent (even if Tuchel criticised some of his counterpressing), jinking and jagging past opponents and playing with a courage of which England need more.

Marc Guéhi had little to do defensively but was smooth on the ball and played the pass of the game to instigate England's opening goal. However, Harry Kane made his 108th international appearance one of his worst and, at No10, Eberechi Eze missed chances and, Tuchel said, didn't bring the same creativity he had showed in training sessions to the real thing.

Tuchel expects Serbia to be both different and the same. More muscular and direct and with far more quality in the front line but similarly inclined to let England have the ball. England's two goals showed what to do against teams settled in their block: move the ball cleverly to make them lose a little of that shape then penetrate from the flanks. The crosses from Madueke, to force a 25th-minute Andorran own goal, and from Reece James, for Declan Rice to head home in the 67th minute, were brilliant.

But there were not enough sequences of true quality like these – and there is something wrong in the balance of a performance when your striker (Kane) ends with 12 touches and your centre backs (Guéhi and Dan Burn) a combined 263.

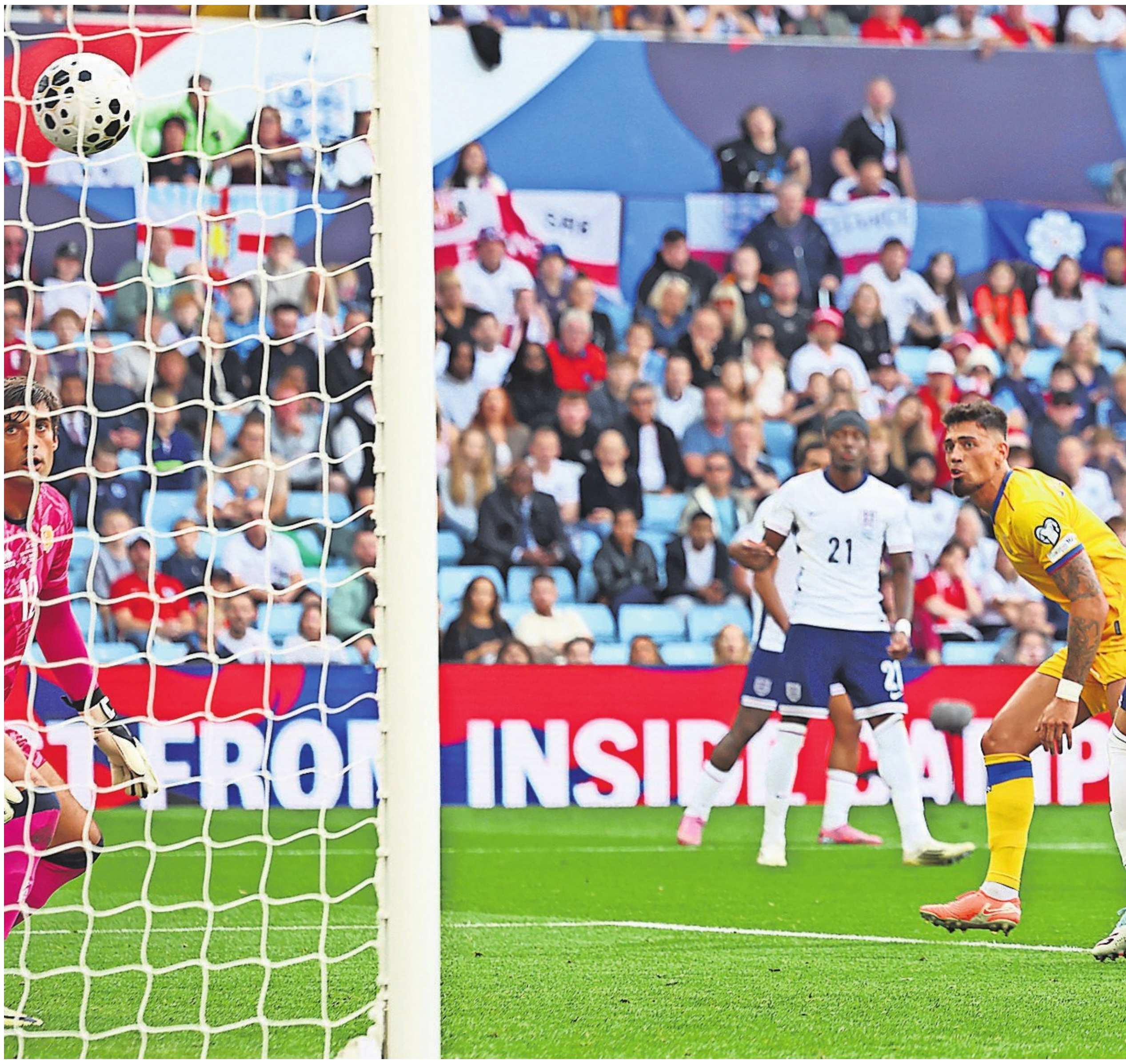
In fairness to Eze and Kane, England didn't get the ball to them enough. It's true that a stampede of bulls coming towards them wouldn't shift Andorra from their 5-4-1 and Eze was in the area most congested with yellow shirts. It's also true that there was a calculating element to how Andorra kept leaving Burn in possession. He did OK on the ball, though – and his fellow Geordie, Anderson, made a difference.

Anderson's smart passing forced a mini-opening for Kane on the edge of Andorra's box early on, but Kane's shot rolled tamely into Iker Álvarez's gloves. When Eze was finally in a good situation, it was after a swift interchange involving Anderson and Madueke, but Marc Valés jutted out a foot to get a nick on the ball and take power off the shot, giving Álvarez a routine save.

Eze lacked conviction with his shot when Rice pounced on the loose ball after an Álvarez parry to cut back to him. Max Llovera blocked and James's cross just evaded Madueke and Kane.

But then it came, an outbreak of clever, patterned and telling football Tuchel was brought in to author. Marcus Rashford switched play inside to Anderson, who helped the ball on to James, who then passed back to Guéhi.

Guéhi's ball to Eze was exactly what England needed: something bolder and more precise than what came before. It was lovely, a straight pass fizzed down the centre, through the marking, to Eze, who played back to Anderson. He found Madueke, who bent in a cross and Christian García, worried about Kane, threw his head at the ball – diverting it into his own net.



That should have been England's platform but, as Tuchel said, the 15 minutes that ensued were his team's most careless. Not enough players took Guéhi's lead: there was a lack of bravery in the passing.

England allowed the game to drift until right before half-time, when Álvarez palmed out a Madueke cross and García cleared just before Eze could convert. Tuchel betrayed his growing angst by smacking his palm in frustration.

He sent England out with more intent and the 25 minutes at the start of the second half was their best period of the game. However, the finishing remained meek. Madueke jagged past his man after a fine switch by Myles Lewis-Skelly and cut back to Eze, but the midfielder was slow with his shot and Álvarez saved. Rashford curled the follow-up wide.

Anderson snapped in to win possession as Andorra played out and all Kane needed to do was play him a simple square pass but Kane played the ball behind him and Anderson couldn't quite adjust. Álvarez – the Andorra manager's son – made a very good save. Then, Eze leant back

Déjà vu all over again — but here's five things we did learn

Paul Joyce

BURN'S BLIND ALLEYS

The Andorra head coach, Koldo Álvarez, must have been content at seeing Dan Burn and Marc Guéhi monopolise the touches for England – more than 260 between them. The sight of Burn dribbling out of defence and then playing a short pass to Myles Lewis-Skelly five yards away became a feature of England's build-up play and did not really fit with the pre-match game plan Thomas Tuchel had espoused.

England did what they always do and the manner of the victory carried a sense of déjà vu, not least with the empty seats in the stands by the end.

SOLID START FOR ANDERSON

A year ago, Angel Gomes was billed by Lee Carsley, the interim head coach, as the answer to England's midfield muddle. Then Curtis Jones came to the fore and here it was Elliot Anderson's opportunity. Promoted to the seniors after impressing when England Under-21 won the European Championship this summer, the Nottingham Forest midfielder saw plenty of the ball and was aggressive in the rare moments Andorra threatened to launch an attack. The sense was he could have challenged himself more, trying to punch passes through the lines, for example, and he should have scored in the second half. Still, the shirt appears to now

AND BRAVERY ARE MISSING

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER BRADLEY ORMESHER

García, with his focus largely on Kane, turns Madueke's cross into his own net as Rice looks on

horribly to yank a Rashford centre into the stand. Andorra even had a shot – hit high over the bar by Ian Olivera, who simply wears "Ian" on his shirt. You would rather like him to line up with the Brazilian, "Kevin" who has just signed for Fulham.

How relieved Rice looked to give England a second goal. It came when Burn fed Guéhi, who spread to James, and the right back bent one of his caviar deliveries to the far post, where Rice, arriving with a good run, nodded down past Álvarez. As Tuchel said, England should have won by three or four. A step in the right direction was his conclusion and, in the context of what came before, it was.

England's ballboy plan, page 7

be his and this was a debut to build on. Serbia on Tuesday will be altogether different.

TRENT'S CHALLENGE

The inclusion in the starting line-up of Lewis-Skelly, having played only 44 minutes for Arsenal this season and made no starts, jarred with the reasoning Tuchel had given when leaving others out of this squad.

Trent Alexander-Arnold, for example, is clearly facing a battle to ingratiate himself with the England head coach, who started Reece James at right back and then introduced Tino Livramento. James had played 100 minutes, with one start, for Chelsea when the squad for this World Cup qualifier was named. He added nine more minutes to that tally against Fulham.

Alexander-Arnold had played 71 minutes and made one start for Real Madrid, which quickly became 143 minutes and two starts. He will be up for the challenge of regaining his place, but it will not be easy to force his way in, especially with James supplying an excellent assist for Declan Rice.

Tuchel's side lead group K with four wins from four

Tuchel insists England are 'on the right path'

Thomas Tuchel says he is "absolutely convinced" England are on the right path despite only beating Andorra 2-0 (Hamzah Khalique-Loonat writes).

England are top of World Cup qualifying group K and are four points clear of their opponents on Tuesday, Serbia, who beat Latvia 1-0 yesterday but have a game in hand. "I am absolutely convinced that we are on the right way and on the right path," Tuchel said.

The England head coach batted away concerns that England did not create much yesterday.

"I think we created more than we converted in Andorra [England won 1-0 in Spain in June] and today," he said.

"I think there are a lot of chances for goals and a lot of half-chances where we can be more clinical. But overall there are much more positive things than the negatives today.

"After four days of training it was a good performance, a deserved result. We should have won with more goals but it's not the problem. The energy was right, the attitude was right."

Tuchel said that Elliot Anderson "passed the test" on his debut. The Nottingham Forest midfielder was "very, very good", the England head coach told ITV.

Tuchel said Anderson was a bit nervous when he joined the squad last week "but then did good and we said, 'Let's try it', and he did it".

"That was the test," Tuchel added, "and I think he passed the test. Why should he not play in Serbia?"

The German added that his side "missed the little moments to accelerate the game" and criticised some of his attacking players.

He said: "Maybe Ebs [Eberechi Eze] didn't have his best day in the No10, the last pass from Noni [Madueke] wasn't clinical enough and [Marcus] Rashford had good moments but couldn't finish them. It's stuff that can happen against a narrow team. The second goal should have come earlier because it gave us a lot of freedom."

Tuchel justified his team's approach, and explained that his full backs, Reece James and Myles Lewis-Skelly, played in high and wide positions, which meant the team played with an attacking, risky shape.

"I'm not sure if we should take more risks," he said. "I think we played with quite a lot of risks because we played with both wingbacks wide from time to time, which is then almost like only the two centre backs and the No 6 in the build-up and in the coverage. It was almost a 3-7 [formation].

"The goals came from wide full backs from us. I think, in the formation, was quite a lot of risk."

World Cup qualifying
Group K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
England	4	4	0	0	8	0	8	**12**
Serbia	3	2	1	0	4	0	4	**7**
Albania	4	1	2	1	4	3	1	**5**
Latvia	4	1	1	2	2	5	-3	**4**
Andorra	5	0	0	5	0	10	-10	**0**

ENGLAND'S FIXTURES

Tuesday Serbia (a). **Oct 14** Latvia (a). **Nov 13** Serbia (h). **Nov 16** Albania (a).

ON TV TUESDAY

Serbia v England
7pm ITV1, kick-off 7.45pm

WHY KANE?

The World Cup is looming and at some point over the coming months the question will be asked what England's Plan B is in the event of an injury to Harry Kane. In the past that plan has been to play the skipper even if he is injured, despite all the denials.

Would Tuchel not have learnt something new by starting with Ollie Watkins against Andorra? Or bringing the Aston Villa forward on at the break?

After all, it was only three months ago that Kane, who had seven touches and made only four passes in the first half, started the 1-0 win against the minnows in Barcelona.

STONES NEEDED AT BACK

It can feel that there has been a distinct lack of progress under Tuchel and the idea of utilising John Stones as a midfield No 6 prior to his withdrawal through injury was another example of that. Sir Gareth Southgate had mooted that prospect in June 2017, before a loss to France in Paris, but never got round to that experiment. Given the instability in England's defence, Tuchel would surely be better off deploying Stones in his regular centre-back position whenever he is fit. If the coach is so worried about his midfield options, that merely adds credence to the criticism he received for waiting months before beginning the job.

Player ratings

By Hamzah Khalique-Loonat

England

JORDAN PICKFORD 5/10

Had next to nothing to do for the vast majority of the game

REECE JAMES 6/10

Superb cross for second goal but could have played a bigger role given his creativity

MARC GUÉHI 6/10

Added penetrative passes and composed in possession. Was not tested defensively

DAN BURN 5/10

Unable to instigate many attacks, instead generally playing the ball wide to Lewis-Skelly

MYLES LEWIS-SKELLY 6/10

Clean and composed on the ball. England really should have used him more

DECLAN RICE 6/10

Scored a good header, which atoned for a poor display

Star man

ELLIOT ANDERSON
7/10

Tidy and efficient on his first senior start. Pressed well. A few nice, sharp passes between the lines

NONI MADUEKE 7/10

His dribbling and crossing was England's primary outlet in the first half

EBERECHI EZE 6/10

Another player whom the game largely passed by. England needed to find him more

MARCUS RASHFORD 5/10

Dribbled aggressively and attempted to get forward, but hampered by a lack of supply

HARRY KANE 4/10

Isolated. Kane did very little, and his team-mates struggled to find him. Twelve touches

Total
63/110

Substitutes Morgan Rogers 7. Tino Livramento 6. Anthony Gordon 7. Ezri Konsa 5. Morgan Gibbs-White 7

Andorra (5-4-1):
I Álvarez — B Borrà, M Llovera, C García, I Olivera, S Nicolás — A Rodrigo (Dacu 81min), P Babot (M Rebés 91), M Valés (c; J Guillén 59), J Cervós (C Rubio 91') — Cucu (G López 59).
Booked Babot (6min).

Substitutes not used
M García, Á Martínez, X Pires, Á Ruíz, J Teixeira, É Izquierdo.

Tottenham's fun times are starting now Levy has gone? Really?

Martin Samuel

The voice of sport

Only now that Daniel Levy has gone can his greatest achievement as the chairman of Tottenham Hotspur be revealed. Imagine doing 25 years as a minority shareholder resisting the bold intentions of Joe Lewis and his Enic group to spend, spend, spend.

Who knew? Despite his title and status, we always thought of Levy as a very well-remunerated employee, doing his boss's bidding. That he was as good as sacked appears to confirm this. If he appeared frugal and prioritised Tottenham as a business entity, it was because that was the policy demanded.

Supporters were angry, managers frustrated, Tottenham often appeared on the brink of a breakthrough only to retreat at a vital moment. Yet that was Levy's job, to run the tightest ship. In many ways, it worked. Levy's acumen built the country's best stadium, an equally admired training ground, and it helped establish Tottenham in English football's elite. Yet on the day he left that was all chopped liver. "More wins, more often," was the brief from those who remain. "Generations of the Lewis family support this special football club and they want what the fans want."

Really, so what was Levy doing for a quarter of century? Going rogue? It might be the Lewis family that is now in charge – siblings Vivienne and Charlie – but nobody told their father Joe how to run his affairs. Harry Redknapp found that out the day he was sacked. Redknapp's future was in the balance. He knew Tottenham had spoken to other managers, including Brendan Rodgers and maybe André Villas-Boas, about his job, and his time there looked to be coming to an end; but Levy was keeping his options open and had also discussed the possibility of a contract extension. Paul Stretford, Redknapp's agent, was negotiating with Levy, while Lewis was present on speakerphone. Redknapp was told it was Lewis's intervention that brought the conversation to an abrupt end with words both brutal and profane. Put it like this: there was absolutely no doubt, in that room, who ran Tottenham. Not Levy.

So, go in a different direction, but unless there has been an epiphany at Enic, the idea that Levy and the owners were pulling in opposite directions seems far-fetched. At any time, a new strategy could have been handed down. Had Lewis, or Enic, wished to spend as Liverpool have done this summer, financial rules permitting, it could have happened. Hell, had anyone above wanted Levy to stop breaking Crystal Palace's nuts over the fee for Eberechi Eze, the same applies.

Levy may have enjoyed his reputation as the toughest negotiator, but it had to chime with what the owners demanded.

If it was only Levy's ego making Tottenham lose good signings that Enic were happy to finance, he would have been swiftly reined in.

Indeed, if the plan is to take the shackles off, why has this decision happened only after the summer transfer window has closed? Tottenham missed out on Eze and Morgan Gibbs-White when a truly ambitious offer with urgent timing could have quickly closed both deals.

If Levy was the obstacle to that, why was he still in a job? Tottenham won the Europa League final on May 21, the summer transfer window opened on June 16. That's almost a month in which Levy could have left on the highest of highs. First trophy in 17 years, Champions League football in the offing, bright future ahead. Instead he stayed on, drove a few more hard bargains, saw another couple of big-ticket items slip through his grasp. If his plan was so very different to that of the owners, it makes no sense. In reality, Levy was so unaware of his impending doom that he still had meetings in his diary on the day he was sacked.

Taking Tottenham forward is their chief executive Vinai Venkatesham, who held the same role at Arsenal from September 2020 to the end of the 2023-24 season, a glorious period in which the club won the 2023 Community Shield. He was at Arsenal in a variety of roles for 14 years, but without the responsibility he will have now.

Let's face it, nobody blames the chief commercial officer if the team come sixth. It's not as if Spurs have recruited David Dein, the boardroom architect of the Arsène Wenger years.

The new non-executive chairman is Peter Charrington, who has deep Lewis family connections as a director of Enic and a senior partner at Nexus Luxury, a company that operates the Albany resort in the Bahamas, co-owned by Tavistock Group, the investment vehicle of Joe Lewis. Charrington is an ally of Vivienne Lewis but his background is private banking, luxury real estate and wealth management – not football. He seems a man more versed in monetising Spurs for their owners than building a team to match Liverpool, so policy over the next 12 months will be interesting.

Say what you like about Levy, but he was very good at what he was asked to do, and it is very unlikely that remit ever included spending whatever it took to win the title. If that is now the primary interest of Tottenham's new regime – "more wins, more often" – wouldn't his football experience still make him the best man for that job? Go on, bid the extra £5 million for Eze, Daniel. Blow Nottingham Forest out of the water, mate.

Ironically, if Levy has worked within Enic's limitations for decades, as seems likely, he may end up feeling as short-changed as his managers.

He would be understandably aggrieved at not being asked to stick around for the fun part; if there is, of course, a fun part. We shall see.

> “
>
> **An ambitious offer with urgent timing could've closed deals for Eze and Gibbs-White**

It seems unlikely that Levy was the obstacle to seeing Gibbs-White, left, and Eze in a Tottenham shirt

Some West Ham fans seem to enjoy turning a drama into a crisis

It could all be better, but West Ham are a long way from their deathbed

Is it possible to have a vote of no confidence in a vote of no confidence? The one by the fans' advisory groups at West Ham United springs to mind. Talk of the club dying, of its existence being threatened, of sustained failure under the present regime — it's all so overwrought.

And entitled. Supporters of clubs in genuine distress, like Sheffield Wednesday, must look at West Ham's fanbase and wonder what will happen if true calamity ever befalls them? West Ham had a dreadful start to the season. After two games, there did not look a poorer team in the league and the transfer window was eight days from closing. The club then spent £60 million on two players, played better in their third league game and won 3-0 at Nottingham Forest. It's not problem solved — this is still going to be a difficult season — but the surest way of turning drama into crisis is for the London Stadium to become a hub of furious discontent, again.

As it always is when West Ham are losing. Everyone reminisces about Upton Park as if it was the sense of place they loved and the scoreline was secondary, but the new ground is fine until the results turn. No issue against Sevilla in the Europa League. No issue when beating Chelsea, or Manchester United. West Ham's net spend between 2021 and 2025 is £331.4 million. In 2023 they won the Uefa Conference League, a first major trophy since 1980. And West Ham's 14 years in the Premier League is the longest stay of any club outside the "big six", except Everton. All of this is on this board's watch. "We will never forgive, and nor will we forget, all of the damage they have done to our club," read another distressed statement, this one from Hammers United.

Anyway, how about this? "Supporters find themselves casting envious glances at the likes of Bournemouth, Brighton & Hove Albion, Brentford and Crystal Palace..." The likes of? How patronising is that? What makes West Ham fans' advisory groups think they are better than the FA Cup holders, or smaller clubs that are fabulously well run? For the record: West Ham v Brighton (since 2017-18) P16 W1 D8 L7; West Ham v Bournemouth (since 2015-16) P16 W5 D8 L3; West Ham v Brentford (since 2021-22) P8 W1 D1 L6; West Ham v Crystal Palace (since 2013-14) P24 W8 D7 L9. So West Ham have played "the likes of" Bournemouth, Brighton, Brentford and Palace 64 times in the league in recent seasons, and won a grand total of 15 games.

It will be claimed this is an indictment of the present regime. No, it's an indictment of West Ham being a largely mid-ranking top-division club across the past two decades, and of money spent unwisely. Nobody would argue the club has got value given their outlay. Recruitment has been inconsistent, sometimes poor, and managerial appointments, too. Yet the club aren't about to die, nor experiencing sustained failure. This is West Ham's longest stay in the top division since 1958-59 to 1977-78; they have spent one season outside the top division in 16 seasons under this ownership, compared to two in the 16 seasons before them. And no trophies in those 16 seasons either; nor in the 16 seasons before that. At the moment, West Ham have the same points as Manchester City. And, no, it won't stay that way for long, but it's still very far from the deathbed. It just could be better, that's all.

PAQUETÁ CASE A LESSON FOR FA

The FA's case against Lucas Paquetá was circumstantial and weakly assembled, but the bigger issue was the punishment they were hoping to land on the back of that. A life ban. They wanted his career over. And they demanded it on evidence probably too flimsy to have made trial in a court of law.

The FA was duty-bound to investigate, once accusations of suspicious betting patterns were made, and if it thought there was sufficient evidence, a charge is understandable, too. Yet it has always been problematic that the burden of proof in football cases is so low. John Terry was cleared in Westminster magistrates' court of racially abusing Anton Ferdinand, but was found guilty by the FA and banned for four games. The stigma around that decision without doubt impacted his career. The FA is not making inconsequential judgments. Paquetá's career could have been over if found guilty. For such a sentence, no administrative body should be acting without stringent standards and the same requirements that exist in the highest courts.

The FA was made to look foolish by a judgment that as good as shredded their argument, but the system itself is unfit for purpose. These are not slaps on the wrist being proposed. There is talk of Paquetá suing but he would be wise to focus on his football, rather than further legal distractions. He has every right to be angry, though. The stakes were impossibly high, yet the burden of proof dangerously low. If there is a lesson from this it is that for serious cases, serious thresholds are required.

Paquetá has every right to be angry

... YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST

A souped-up fit-and-proper persons regime, called the Owners, Directors and Senior Executives test, is the first move of the independent regulator. More stringent than present rules, it will not only be able to ban individuals from holding executive positions but, in extremis, remove owners and appoint third parties to temporarily run the club, and even sell it.

And some of you may recognise that concept from these pages: "Once an owner cannot pay the staff, or another club its money owed, the league should have the power to seize the asset and call in administrators." Sunday Times, July 6, 2025.

Some of you may know it from a couple of years ago: "I'd have teams of lawyers and accountants on standby ready to march on Reading this morning, and take the club out of the hands of Dai Yongge [inset]. The moment an owner can't pay the wages, or HMRC or other clubs and contractors, even for a matter of weeks, he would forfeit the right to run the business." Sunday Times, November 26, 2023.

And, bless you, some of you may even remember similar ideas voiced in columns written for another organisation entirely. Thanks for sticking with me, by the way: "...will result in the club being placed under the control of an executive administrator appointed by the English Football Association, where it will remain until sold at a competitive market price." April 21, 2021. So, just to say it's nice when a plan comes together. And you're welcome.

Martin Samuel on The Game podcast

Listen to Martin's views every Thursday as he debates the latest talking points in football with Jonathan Northcroft, Gregor Robertson and other Times and Sunday Times writers. Search 'The Game' on your podcast app or go to: THETIMES.COM/PODCASTS/THE-GAME

Loyal Guéhi still has great career ahead, but equally as important ... respect

Marc Guéhi is not a mug, and his cancelled move from Crystal Palace to Liverpool cannot become the exemplum of this transfer window. Guéhi behaved impeccably but did not get the reward of those who downed tools. This cannot be the lesson for young players. See what happened to Guéhi? Decency gets you nowhere; loyalty is what they shaft you with.

For a start, Guéhi is not Alexander Isak or Yoane Wissa, players who were passing through at Newcastle United and Brentford. Guéhi's attachment to Crystal Palace was greater – even if his first club was Chelsea – and his determination to lead them in European qualifiers showed that. There is every chance Palace could win the Uefa Conference League this season – Fiorentina and Strasbourg are arguably their strongest opposition – and if Guéhi is still there and captain that night, it will be special for him.

Equally, he is a free agent next summer. Already there is talk of interest from Bayern Munich, Real Madrid and Barcelona, who could all strike deals in January. Despite being so close to joining Liverpool, Guéhi owes them nothing. They had all summer to secure his transfer, with Palace openly amenable to a sale, and prioritised other targets. Either way, whatever Guéhi decides, a move as a free agent makes him a very rich man, and nobody can begrudge that. And yes, this could be a huge season at Liverpool, too, but Guéhi will still be only 25 when it ends. He's got a great career ahead, and respect and a reputational standing Isak will never possess again, no matter how many goals he scores.

Guéhi, need not worry. He will get his reward in the end

BAD BREAKAWAY MEMORIES AS DORRIES BREAKS AWAY

"We need experienced people, we need people who have been in government," Nigel Farage announced at Reform's party conference and unveiled... Nadine Dorries. Just to remind, Dorries, right, was secretary of state for digital, culture, media and sport when news of the Super League breakaway surfaced. The Premier League claims her understanding was such that she asked whether they were in favour of it. So, an experience all right.

LIKE RAYNER'S STAMP DUTY, REAL MATHS MATTERS

It hasn't been the best year for mathematics, and we're not just talking within the office of the former deputy prime minister. Those who make revenue from knowing the business of football aren't exactly topping the charts, either. Premier League clubs spent more than £3 billion in the summer transfer window? No, they didn't. They spent nothing like that. If you buy a £1 million house but made a profit of £300,000 on your last one, you haven't spent £1 million, have you? That £300,000 didn't vanish and isn't insignificant. Neither is the money the Premier League clubs brought in. It's actually quite a lot. We can't just leave it out of the equation and still have a correct answer.

So here's the real sum:

£3,193,400,000 - £1,831,400,000

Answer: £1,362,000,000.

That's the summer window spending in the Premier League: £1.362 billion. Not more than £3 billion. Still a lot but, actually, only 42.65 per cent of the amount stated. For a sport pretty much governed by accountants, like Angela Rayner's stamp duty, this stuff matters.

Deals involving Routledge, far left, Berbatov and Bostock showed Levy's approach to transfers

I sold players to Levy — this is the truth of what it was like to do deals with him

SIMON JORDAN

Former Crystal Palace chairman

I have had two relationships with Daniel Levy. The first, as owner and chairman of Crystal Palace from 2000 to 2010, was purely commercial. Dealing with him could be a frustrating, infuriating and abrasive experience. No doubt he'd have said the same about me.

The second relationship has grown since, borne of respect for both the man and the qualities that made him such a formidable operator.

There's a reason why he lasted so long at Tottenham Hotspur, and why Spurs fans have a lot to be thankful for. A tough, relentless, unblinking negotiator, Cambridge-educated Daniel shares many qualities with his predecessor at Spurs, Lord Alan Sugar, even if he's much more quietly spoken.

One of my first interactions with him came in January 2005, when Spurs tried to prise Wayne Routledge from Palace. Routledge, the jewel of an academy that produced Nathaniel Clyne, Victor Moses and Wilfried Zaha, had already had his head turned. Yet when it came to the actual negotiations, Tottenham were insulting. Levy's method was to creep up in miserly increments. Ten grand here, 20 grand there. It felt less like a serious bid and more like being pecked to death by a tax inspector.

At 8pm on deadline day, when a man's thoughts naturally turn to more civilised activities, I'd given up.

I told him: "Piss off, you're wasting my time. Even if I wanted to sell, you haven't even agreed personal terms or performed a medical."

The Spurs response? "Don't worry, he's around the corner, we'll do the medical now." How did Spurs' management even know where my player was? Why were they speaking to him directly? Tapping up for sure. They were in danger of being sanctioned. Unacceptable. Phones were slammed down. Routledge stayed. That summer we agreed compensation, but Daniel's negotiation style left a sour taste in my mouth.

In 2008, Spurs swooped for John Bostock, a Palace prodigy once courted by Barcelona at 15. We had him down as a future Palace captain. He hadn't even signed professional forms when Tottenham announced his capture before we'd agreed a deal. At a tribunal they got him for only £700,000, a travesty.

So, yes, I have had reason to dislike Daniel's methods. He doesn't blink, he doesn't soften, he will never give you an inch unless it suits him, but that made him incredibly effective for Tottenham.

Sir Alex Ferguson moaned that dealing with Daniel over Dimitar Berbatov was more painful than his hip operation. But that spoke more about Manchester United's arrogance than it did about Daniel's stubbornness. United were used to taking who they wanted, when they wanted, but Daniel stood firm. His steel protected Tottenham time and again.

He's a highly rational, unemotional straight shooter. An honest man in a frequently dishonest business.

He won't indulge in one-upmanship. He set values on players, like Routledge or Gareth Bale, and stuck to it. If you wanted the player, you paid his price. Simple as that.

That's not "master deal-making", it's basic discipline. Rare in today's game, where clubs are run by billionaires and nation states who think nothing of throwing money around.

He was brilliant at selling players because he held that line. He struggled on the buying side though, because it requires flexibility, speed, impulsiveness.

Daniel is a cautious chairman, one I analyse in my soon-to-be-released second book *Poking the Bear*. He is an anachronism, a throwback to an era when clubs were owned (or part-owned) and run by local, commercially minded business people.

In the 1990s a new wave of business-savvy entrepreneurs like David Dein, Lord Sugar and Sir John Hall transformed football into today's multibillion-pound business. Daniel was one of the last bastions of that tradition, now replaced by a wave of nation states and oligarchs, who don't worry about profit and loss any more.

In the end, Daniel almost became the "Arsène Wenger of chairmen", clinging stubbornly to the idea of sustainability as a trophy.

He built one of the best stadiums and training complexes in the world and leaves Tottenham financially stable, its value rising from £80 million to more than £3 billion under his watch. With minimal external investment. A real achievement.

I spoke to Dein yesterday morning, maybe expecting the Arsenal man to express some gleeful schadenfreude at his former counterpart's departure. Dein's view? "Daniel hasn't done a good job at Spurs. He's done a sensational job." So even his arch-nemesis and closest rival admires him.

> “
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> **Negotiating with Daniel felt like being pecked to death by a tax inspector**

What's more, Dein told me that there were echoes of his own north London demise. "He was Mr Spurs and I was Mr Arsenal. Maybe the other directors and shareholders suffered from jealousy and envy and wanted to clip his wings? It happened to me. It was ruthless and it was ugly." Recollections may differ, of course.

But is Daniel a modern football man? These days a global sports brand requires glory to grow. Two trophies in 25 years is hardly showbusiness. Football is no longer an economically rational market. Roman Abramovich and Sheikh Mansour changed all that.

You may think their spending is economic madness, but it works as it buys trophies. Sporting success increases the saleable value of the club, irrespective of losses. Perhaps that is why Enic, the British investment group and majority owner of Spurs, wanted to replace him?

Tottenham fans have moaned about the lack of success under Daniel, but spending money and hiring big-name managers does not guarantee success – just look at Everton. After the near-miss under Mauricio Pochettino, Levy hired two of the most successful and difficult managers in world football, José Mourinho and Antonio Conte, in an attempt to get over the line and actually win something for a change. It didn't work. Short-term thinking rarely does. In any case, Daniel knew it was pointless trying to compete with the billions being thrown at the game elsewhere. Far better to build a solid foundation, one that future owners of Tottenham could deploy to go chasing the sovereign wealth funds into the sporting stratosphere if so inclined.

I spoke to the former Spurs midfielder Danny Murphy about Levy yesterday morning. He said: "My overriding memory of Daniel is his kindness, and reasonableness, which is something people don't associate with him." He describes a patient, thoughtful man. When Murphy's father died, Daniel let him leave for Fulham for virtually nothing. A remarkable, human gesture that changed the course of Murphy's career.

Not being a charismatic communicator means Levy will never be mistaken for the next Bruce Forsyth, but I can say unequivocally that he's a very decent man, very well-mannered and a believer in etiquette.

I remember going to the boardroom as the visiting chairman when we played at Spurs in the FA Cup in 2004. Dressed in a suit but no tie – I wasn't allowed in the boardroom until I put one on. Daniel sent me down a Tottenham tie, to which I said, "Are you mad? I'm not going to wear a Tottenham tie." I ended up borrowing a director's tie to get in. At the time, I thought it was ridiculous. Now, I see it as part of who Daniel is: principled, precise, maybe rigid, but always consistent.

I don't always think Daniel's way of doing things was right, but I respect him and there's not a lot of respect going around in football. The game is increasingly dominated by foreign owners with conflicting motives and no real affinity with the culture of this country. Daniel considers the Premier League to be Britain's greatest export. He's right.

Would I hire Daniel Levy to run things If I controlled a major football club? Bloody right I would. He's a brilliant administrator, a clever man whom Tottenham fans should thank for creating a magnificent platform for future success. I wish him well.

● *Listen to Simon Jordan and Jim White on talkSport every weekday from 10am to 1pm.*

Arsenal make quality count – but upstarts look the part

STUART MACFARLANE/ARSENAL FC/GETTY IMAGES

Smith, the new signing, jumps into the arms of Emily Fox after scoring a fine equaliser for Arsenal

Arsenal 4
Smith 29, Kelly 45, Blackstenius 83, Maanum 84

London City Lionesses 1
Asllani 17 pen

Kit Shepard
Women's Football Reporter

There could not have been a more symbolic launch of the Women's Super League's great experiment. After a summer of eye-watering spending, London City Lionesses made their top-flight debut away to Arsenal – the antithesis to the division's upstarts. Despite losing, London City showed they can trouble the established elite.

Owned by the American billionaire Michele Kang, London City are the WSL's first standalone women's club, having broken away from Millwall in 2019. Backed by Kang's money since 2023, they signed 17 players this summer, including paying a seven-figure fee to acquire Grace Geyoro on deadline day.

In the other corner was the epitome of old money. Arsenal Women have a prestigious, decades-long history and align with their men's team closely. They are also the European champions, so London City had a tough opening-day assignment.

They fared pretty well. London City took the lead and stayed in the game until two late Arsenal goals. They had no answer for Olivia Smith's brilliant equaliser and faded at the end of the first half – when Chloe Kelly put the home side ahead – but regrouped admirably. Had Kelly been sent off for a terribly cynical challenge in the 64th minute, the climax could have been different.

The newly promoted team went straight back down in the past two WSL campaigns, but London City look capable of a top-half finish.

They really should crack mid-table with this squad. Geyoro, the France midfielder, was not available barely 24 hours after signing, but London City's XI included Kosovare Asllani (the Sweden and London City captain), Saki Kumagai (the Japan captain) and Jana Fernández (signed from Barcelona for £260,000).

Arsenal flexed their traditional might in the pre-match festivities at the Emirates Stadium, using pyrotechnics and having Leah Williamson parade the Champions League trophy. Just maybe, Arsenal were reminding London City they were playing with the big-hitters now. "I was a little afraid at the beginning, especially for our young players," Jocelyn Prêcheur, London City's head coach, said. "But when I saw how we started, I thought they were able to forget about the environment."

Indeed, the roles were reversed early. Williamson was out due to a knee injury, so Arsenal started the 18-year-old Katie Reid at centre back. In the 15th minute, Reid naively lunged at a loose ball inside her area. Asllani, who is double Reid's age, got to the ball a split-second before the teenager and wisely milked the inevitable contact while travelling away from goal. It was a needless penalty from Arsenal's perspective, and Asllani converted.

London City were meant to be the novices but Arsenal, with their teenage centre back, looked callow while London City, led by their experienced captain, were unperturbed by the spotlight in the opening stages.

They are not yet the finished product, though. London City were soon undone by individual brilliance they rarely encountered in the second tier. It came from Arsenal's own big-money transfer. Olivia Smith, who signed for the first £1 million fee in women's football in July, fired a long-range shot into the top corner after London City's defence backed off.

Once level, Arsenal took control and went in front just before half-time. Kelly cleverly diverted home a low cross from Alessia Russo, who had created space with a strong run. "I really liked the first 25 minutes," Prêcheur said. "The organisation was good, we were really in the game. After that, the game changed completely, Arsenal increased their rhythm. I regret that we didn't exist in the second half."

Prêcheur's assessment was harsh because London City did not capitulate. A sliced cross from their winger Rofiat Imuran struck a post and Kelly, who often treads a fine line between physical and dirty, received only a yellow card for raking her studs down Nikita Parris's calf. Prêcheur and his Arsenal counterpart, Renée Slegers, opted not to comment on the decision.

London City eventually wilted. Stina Blackstenius and Frida Maanum came off the bench to score goals 83 seconds apart. Both were assisted by Beth Mead, whom London City tried to sign this summer. Arsenal can resist the disruptors for now but, with Kang watching on from the posh seats at the Emirates, they are here to stay.

Arsenal (4-2-3-1): D van Domselaar — E Fox, K Reid, S Catley, K McCabe (T Hinds 87) — K Little, M Caldentey — O Smith (C Foord 61), V Pelova (F Maanum 61), C Kelly (B Mead 76) — A Russo (S Blackstenius 77). **Booked** Kelly.
London City Lionesses (4-3-1-2); E Lete — J Fernández, S Kumagai, A Kennedy (T Goldie 83), E Linari — K Zelem (J Roddar 46), M Pérez (S Franssi 65), R Imuran (L Corrales 90+3) — K Asllani — I Goodwin, N Parris (S Jakobsson 65). **Booked** Parris, Zelem, Kumagai.
Referee S Fullicks. **Attendance** 38,142.

TODAY'S FIXTURES

Tottenham v West Ham

Manchester United v Leicester City

Liverpool v Everton

Brighton v Aston Villa

All games kick off at 12pm

England ballboy plan to stop best young footballers defecting

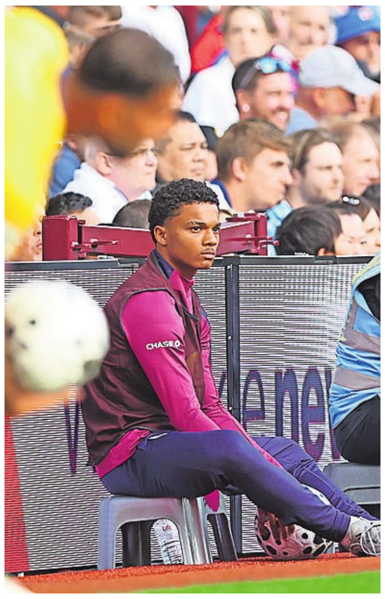
Jonathan Northcroft

England are using a novel weapon in the growing battle between nations for the best young talent – ballboys.

When Thomas Tuchel's side played Andorra at Villa Park yesterday, the ballboy duties were fulfilled by players from the periphery of the England Under-15 squad, in what is becoming a regular practice at home senior international fixtures.

The idea is to demonstrate to the youngsters they are valued by the FA, even if they are not deemed quite ready for caps at junior level. It is seen as a way of persuading them to stick with the England pathway, rather than switch to another country for which they may be eligible.

About 75 per cent of players of academy age who are eligible for England also qualify to represent at least one other nation and the scramble for talent is becoming increasingly fierce. "The badge used to be enough but now you have to offer more," a source said.


The FA believe ballboy experience will develop footballing awareness

It is hoped that, through their ballboy experiences, the budding Lions will gain an insight into what is involved in playing for England's senior side, and they will be stationed at parts of the stadium befitting their own roles on the pitch.

The forwards among the youngsters, for example, will be positioned closest to where Harry Kane is likely to operate in the game.

Adding to their experience, the under-15 side attended St George's Park and received talks from the FA technical director, John McDermott, and the former England internationals Andy Johnson and Dion Dublin.

Using young players as ballboys also has the advantage of helping to increase their footballing awareness, which should make them quicker and more efficient at their jobs – important, given that Tuchel wanted England to keep a high tempo against Andorra.

His England side featured several players who were eligible to play for other countries, including Elliot Anderson, who came close to representing Scotland before deciding his future lies with England.

Such is the fight for talent that other nations are now holding training camps on English soil, to allow English-resident youngsters to have a taste of their set-ups without having to travel.

The third edition of the Unity Cup, which took place in May and featured Ghana, Jamaica, Nigeria and Trinidad and Tobago, was held at the Brentford Community Stadium to provide a tournament local to those countries' huge diasporas in London.

‘I went days with no sleep keeping Wednesday up but I had to move forward’

After fan protests, unpaid wages and owner’s feng shui, former Germany No 2 Danny Röhl believes that life at Hillsborough has prepared him for anything

JONATHAN NORTHCROFT

Football Correspondent

When Danny Röhl got the call offering him the Sheffield Wednesday job he was at the airport with his wife and two sons, leaving for a holiday in Turkey. He caught the flight and took his family to their resort before heading off again, to fly to London.

This summer was not dissimilar. The Röhls were in Turkey once more when Danny’s agent phoned to say the terms of his departure from Wednesday were proving hard to broker with the club’s eccentric owner, Dejphon Chansiri. Another holiday bit the dust. Röhl jetted to England to fulfil his contract, doing two weeks of pre-season until an exit deal was agreed.

Both his arrival and departure were examples of how, at Chansiri’s Wednesday, a person learns to – forgive the pun – Röhl with it, and reflecting on 21 months as manager there, Danny says with an ironic smile: “Yeah, it was the full package.”

Fan protests, unpaid wages, logistical farces, a battle over transfers, a relegation dogfight, an owner who rejected a training-ground revamp because he disliked the feng shui… there are more straightforward first management jobs. “A lot of good experience for me,” Röhl quips. “Some people said, ‘If you survived Wednesday then you learnt a lot.’ ”

He was 34 and the youngest manager in England’s top four divisions when he replaced Xisco Muñoz in October 2023. Wednesday were rock bottom of the Championship, with two points from ten games, after their worst start to a season in 157 years.

Röhl arrived with an incredible CV for someone only a year older than the club captain, Barry Bannan: Germany No 2 and assistant manager at Bayern Munich, Southampton and RB Leipzig; protégé of Hansi Flick and Ralf Rangnick. And, from the start, his coaching precocity was evident: with football that was high-energy but also high on tactical detail and flexibility, he drove Wednesday to safety, inspiring and unifying the squad despite it containing 19 players whose contracts were up at the end of the campaign.

After guaranteeing survival with victory away to Sunderland on a joyous final day, flushed with optimism Röhl signed a new three-year contract. The indications from Chansiri, a Thai tuna magnate, were that he would get the tools to mount a promotion push. It didn’t take long for doubts to form.

The training ground needed a new gym and there was no undersoil heating for the pitches, nor covers to protect them in cold weather, and things moved slowly when trying to get these issues fixed.

With the training ground unusable in December and January, Röhl trained his players at Hillsborough, until the surface there deteriorated too. Last week, The Times revealed Wednesday practised at university facilities and on the artificial surface at a social club this summer because of ongoing problems with their training ground pitches. Sometimes, during Röhl’s time, they had to abandon practice and have meetings instead.

Reshaping the squad proved problematic too. Chansiri insists on conducting transfer and contract negotiations himself and Wednesday have no director of football. Despite everything, Röhl had Wednesday three points off sixth place when the winter transfer window opened. Röhl believed that, with the right signings, a charge to the play-offs was on. Yet preferred targets, like Louie Barry, went elsewhere and the reinforcements that arrived at the end of the window were eclectic signings: the 33-year-old Stuart Armstrong, an out-of-contract Japanese left back (Ryo Hatsuse) and Ibrahim Cissoko, a young Dutch loanee.

Chansiri had refused to engage with Southampton when they made an approach for Röhl in December and, during a rambling, five-hour fans’ forum in mid-January, announced he and his manager had not spoken for a month and said Röhl was “very brave” to have suggested supporters should go there and question him on transfers.

By April, their relations had broken down completely and club employees were not being paid; for the ensuing three months the players and coaching staff did not receive their wages on time either. Röhl came to a reluctant conclusion.

“It was around the Hull game, where we lost to a very late goal,” he says. “We couldn’t pay the salaries and wages, the communication was not what I expected and there were all the small things. I fought myself, and asked myself: ‘What could happen in the summer? Do I have the conviction we can make the next step?’

“I tried to speak with the club, to see if there was a dialogue, and when there wasn’t I had to take a decision,” Röhl says. Once the club refused to discuss his future, he pushed – unsuccessfully – for an early departure, wanting avoid a summer of uncertainty for himself and the club.

It’s not that he shirks challenges. Chris Powell, his No 2 at Wednesday, tells of Röhl’s extraordinary work ethic. Powell would watch the opposition two or three times on video but come into the analysis meeting and find Röhl had been up until 4am, until he had viewed ten or 11 of their games. “I’d say, ‘Don’t you ever sleep?’ ” Powell says, laughing.

Because Chansiri likes a slim operation, Röhl would find himself doing tasks such as approving hotel bookings and helping to organise bus travel, and if the squad needed an overnight stay he would have to write a detailed email outlining why. It affronts him that some have suggested his commitment wavered after the Southampton interest was rebuffed.

“Just a small example. [In March] we played at Plymouth on Saturday and Norwich on Tuesday and I worked on Monday over the whole night. I didn’t sleep, to prepare for Norwich. If someone speaks about my attitude, that something changed, it’s completely wrong,” he says. “What changed in the second half of the season was not me but the mood at the club.”

Indeed, in the fortnight after Röhl cut short his holiday to go back for pre-season he held 40 planning meetings to prepare the club for the 2025-26 campaign – despite knowing he would leave the moment his severance was agreed. He looks backs now not with anger but fondness – and pride that, despite all last season’s difficulties, Wednesday still ended 12th, their best finish in eight years.

English football’s youngest managers

Rohl was the fifth youngest manager/head coach in the top four divisions of English football last season

Manager	Club	Game	Age (at that game)
Fabian Hürzeler	Brighton	v Everton (17/8)	31y 173d
Conor Hourihane*	Barnsley	v Mansfield (15/3/25)	34y 41d
Johannes Hoff Thorup	Norwich	v Oxford (10/8/24)	34 326d
Tom Cleverley*	Watford	v Millwall (10/8/24)	34y 364d
Danny Röhl	Sheff Wed	v Plymouth (11/8/24)	35y 105d

Does not include interim or caretaker appointments

* Hourihane and Cleverly initially appointed as interim head coaches but then appointed on permanent basis

He cherishes the two phone calls he received from Bannan (who says Röhl is the best coach he has had in his career) when he departed and Wednesday supporters singing his name at Watford, in his last game. “That was a great moment and if you ask me now, I had the best time as manager in Sheffield. I love the fans, love my players. I love even our [training] facility.

“But I have emotion and I am ambitious. I don’t want to finish 15th. I need the mindset of [feeling] you’re moving forwards. I want to say this again: it was never that I changed my attitude. The love was always there. And I was so sad to leave.”

Chansiri? “At first, when we meet each other for dinner, it was always in good humour and we could laugh together. But what I learnt in Red Bull was that in modern football you need the best man for the job. There’s a reason why a successful club has a big structure, with technical directors, sporting director and so on.”

There is a story [it has been dismissed as a jest by insiders] about Chansiri asking staff if they could change the flow of the River Don that runs alongside Hillsborough, for feng shui reasons. It is also said Chansiri rejected a set of plans for a training ground revamp because the structure of a piece of land involved did not look lucky.

However, Röhl shrugs. “Luck is very important to him. He tries everything,” Röhl says. “I think it’s a cul-

LORNE CAMPBELL/GUZELIAN

Röhl is refreshed and ready for work again after his rollercoaster 21 months as Wednesday manager, below

tural thing. You have to accept it. It's nothing negative."

And the months of not being paid? "Everybody was affected but I felt, more, for people in regular jobs at the club. Everybody knows life is expensive. You have to pay bills," he says.

A hallmark of Röhl, at Wednesday, was his ability to flex and adapt his football – to the demands of the Championship with all its fixtures and differing settings and opponents, and within games.

There was one at Middlesbrough where Wednesday trailed 3-0 and he rejigged the line-up and tactics at half-time. It finished 3-3 with Middlesbrough down to ten men and hanging on. "I want to see a team really brave to take [the game] forward instead of sitting back," he says. "I will not park a bus."

Flick visited him in Sheffield and last month Röhl was in Mallorca to watch Flick's Barcelona and he is planning a study visit, to spend a week with La Liga's champions. Refreshed and ready to work again, ideally his next club would be in Germany or England, but he is open-minded.

"I've said many times, the biggest goal is to work with the best players you can" he says. "But also loved working, at Wednesday.

"For me it's not important if you have two pitches or four pitches for the training, what matters is if you have the right people around you. It's very important for humans and people [to feel] they want to go in the same direction."

Alyson Rudd

My five-step plan to stop VAR ruining great goals – trying to teach them to do a better job is clearly not working

The country is horribly divided, with only the one unifying factor; despair of VAR. We headed into the international break, all of us mouths agape – not at the prospect of England facing Andorra, but of the interference that led to a quite beautiful goal for Fulham being disallowed for a player, Rodrigo Muniz, having the gall to outwit a defender, Trevoh Chalobah, and pirouette past him.

Once again Howard Webb, the chief refereeing officer, was forced to apologise. "It wasn't controversial, it was wrong," Webb said.

Maybe one day his ability to utter the hardest word will be shown to have helped improve how VAR is implemented. In the short term it leaves fans and clubs tearing at their eyes in disbelief because VAR became a parody as soon as it interpreted a natural, balletic action as a foul in the build-up to a lovely finish from the 18-year-old Josh King.

Briefing VAR personnel to be better is not working. It all feels like a teacher asking a classroom of eight-year-olds to not look out of the window, but down at their books. And, of course, they all look out of the window.

But there are five ways in which the landscape could be made more palatable.

1) GET REFS OUT OF STOCKLEY PARK

The VAR hub in Stockley Park should be a referee-free zone. Those operating the technology should be experts at the technology, while well-briefed about the Laws of the Game and with a proven record of having watched 10,000 hours of football matches. This would improve speed of assessment and, crucially, lead to conversations without an agenda.

The VAR, now reborn as a VAE (Video Assessment Expert), would alert the on-field referee to an incident, such as possible serious foul play, but the inference would be: "You're the referee, just checking you saw this." Referees can opt to go to a monitor, but more in the spirit of confirming they saw what they thought they saw rather than because a colleague is telling them they ought to take another look.

It has to be made much more palatable for the on-field officials to back their own judgment, especially while peering down at what is a too-small screen offering a worse view than the fans get at home on their 50-inch plasmas.

2) PUT THEM ON THE CLOCK

Install a countdown clock. If you stare long enough at any contact it starts to look illegal. If an incident takes longer than 30 seconds to assess, the potential infringement cannot be judged to be a clear and obvious error by the officials.

As soon as the referee has awarded or disallowed a goal the clock starts ticking. The fans inside and outside the stadium know the wait will soon be over and no longer find themselves shifting from sheer unadulterated delight to utter boredom.

3) LET EVERYONE KNOW WHO'S IN CHARGE

There should be an announcement before all games, in the stadium and inside the VAE hub, that external reviews are applied only to correct obvious errors. The match is refereed by the officials on the pitch who, being in the thick of the action, see more clearly what constitutes an infringement.

4) TIP THE SCALES

The more referees peer at their tiny pitch-side monitors, the more it drains what little aura they have. Referees need to be respected more. What is it about overseas officials that lends them a gravitas that transcends VAR? The Premier League spends the most money in the transfer window and is seen as the Holy Grail, yet its officials are of the more homespun variety.

Where is our Felix Brych, the recently retired, fêted German referee who is a lawyer and a lecturer? So many overseas officials maintain a strong enough aura to navigate the VAR age so you are left feeling they ran the show, not those running the replays. VAR is not in charge and yet in the Premier League it dominates and diminishes those who ought to be brimming with authority.

5) SCRUTINISE PROPERLY

Rethink the role of the TV referees. When was the last time a former official told you something you either believed or was illuminating? The problem with broadcasters employing recently retired referees is that they are not television personalities and they are worried not only about contradicting the on-field official, but also the VAR. For the role to work, such pundits need to feel independent.

ITV hired Christina Unkel for Euro 2024, an American former referee who understood the need for more authoritative voices on TV, and she was a hit because she is highly intelligent and prepared to have an opinion. Now that we have an extra level of officiating, Britain should be trying to find its own versions of the sprightly attorney. Viewers deserve better insight.

McIlroy in hunt despite 'frustrating' day

Golf

Tom Kershaw

A frustrated Rory McIlroy will head into the final round of the Amgen Irish Open four shots adrift of leader Adrien Saddier at The K Club.

The Northern Irishman recorded a bogey-free round of 68, four under par, at the 2006 Ryder Cup venue to ensure he remains in contention in Kildare, although the world No2's body language often suggested he is still in need of some fine-tuning before Team Europe head to New York this month.

McIlroy, who won the Irish Open at the K Club in 2016, made light work of the par-five 4th before a sublime approach to the 5th. However, his momentum then stalled around the turn and the 36-year-old twice backed off a jittery six-foot par putt at the 13th as the wind picked up.

Holding his nerve there appeared to be a springboard for a charge after a 37ft birdie putt at the 14th, but McIlroy struggled to judge the wind on his approach shots and only a birdie at the last could apply further pressure on the leader.

"As I was walking off the 18th green, I said to Harry [Diamond, his caddie] this is probably the most frustrating four under par round of golf I've played in a while," McIlroy said.

"I had plenty of chances. It got gusty at the end. I felt like I gave myself a lot of chances, hit some good putts that didn't go in. Had a nice one that dropped at 14. I feel like all day I was just trying to keep myself in close position to the lead. I feel like I could be a couple of shots better, but overall still in a decent position going into tomorrow."

"I do [feel like I've got a low one in me tomorrow]. If I can get off to a fast start and put a little bit of pressure on the guys behind, hopefully I'll be at the back nine in contention."

Saddier, 33, who turned professional in 2013, has been a late bloomer in the professional ranks and picked up his first DP World Tour title at the Italian Open in June. The Frenchman matched McIlroy's 68 to hold a one-shot lead over Ángel Hidalgo, who said his stunning nine under par round of 63 felt like playing a computer game.

Concussion and me I couldn't

In an exclusive extract from his new autobiography, Wales great **George North** reveals how after four concussions in five months he considered giving up the game before seeking out the specialist help he still uses today

I am going to tell you quite a lot about concussion. Some of it will make sense. Some of it won't, unless you've been there. A big part of me doesn't even want to write this, and not only because, as a rugby player, you don't want concussion to be part of your life story.

When you're knocked out in front of nine million people watching on television, and then it happens again in the same match, your personal health becomes a national debate. People you've never been in the same room with discuss in depth on TV and in newspapers something they have no specific knowledge about.

I have a slight fear that by talking about it here, I'm going to trigger that all over again. But I've got to be honest about what happened to me, and what I did about it, and why the single hardest thing I've had to deal with in my career might actually be one of the best things I've done too.

What does concussion feel like? Each one happens in a different way, and each one feels different when it does. My first came in the autumn international against New Zealand in 2014. Alun Wyn Jones and me in the defensive line together, coming in to tackle the same man and cracking heads and going down. Alun Wyn got up. I did not, for a while – at least not until the All Blacks had exploited the space left out wide to put Jerome Kaino over in the far corner for their second try.

I was aware something had happened. Like something had just stunned me. I wasn't out cold but I wasn't good either. You know the thing where a dog gets tapped on the nose, and it looks confused and stops in its tracks? That's what it felt like. A glitch in time, a jump cut that doesn't quite make sense. I didn't feel worried. Certainly not panicked. I wasn't trying to stagger to my feet and get moving again.

Sensible thoughts in my head. "Oh, I've had a good whack here…" A pause, a moment of self-appraisal. "Something's… I don't feel quite right." It made the next part quite simple. Even before the medical team did the Head Injury Assessment and made the right decision, I had done my own evaluation. "Well, if I'm not right, how can I put the team at risk and go back out when I can't do the job I'm supposed to be doing?" And you have complete trust in the experts in these moments.

I was 22 years old, still a young man in a big world, still stacking up the new experiences. The medical team had got me through every knock and injury I'd had. In the same way as I believed in the boys I was shoulder to shoulder with in every session and every game, I believed in our backroom team. I followed the protocols and we all did everything right. I was a bit rough, but I didn't play for a few weeks, and I came through all the tests and I was fine.

What I had no way of knowing was that this was only the start of a horrible spell for me. Against England, in the opening match of the new year's Six Nations, I took a boot to the chin from their lock Dave Atwood. I went off. I had an HIA. I passed, and came back on.

Twenty minutes into the second half, trying to stop Mike Brown going over in the corner, I smacked heads with Richard Hibbard, and went down again. This time I didn't go off. I played on. Neither of the two were deliberate actions. There was also nothing I could have done about them.

When you're rehabbing, you look after that particular part of your body. You build up other areas – do your knee work, do your quad and hamstring strengthening, bring in a lot of balance stuff. All of it to prepare you for the forces that will hit you and turn you and test you in a game.

You can't ask someone to kick you in the head. You can't practise dealing with head collisions. This is international rugby. The speed of it takes some things out of your control. You've got a split second going into contact, and you always try to get your body and your head in the right place. But you're not the only input. There's the man you're tackling, and there's where he's going, and where his team-mates might be trying to shove him, and where your own team-mates are coming in from and the split-second decisions they're making.

> Beckham got Calvin Klein underwear, while I was the poster boy for concussion

So it happened twice in the same game. And whereas with the concussion against the All Blacks I knew straight away, with the kick to the head I didn't. I had ultimate trust in the medical team. They do the right thing at the time, you follow it, and you pass it, and you go back on.

The Hibbard one? Of all the heads I could have met, I hit one which is about four days' thick. This time, I was out cold. I was gone. Why did I stay on? There was an investigation from World Rugby in the aftermath. It found a systematic error rather than a human one. Our medical team had missed the second head injury. They had no access to video replays. Our coaches had our analysts and their laptops next to them, but they were used to turning round instant reviews of passages of play, rather than medical issues.

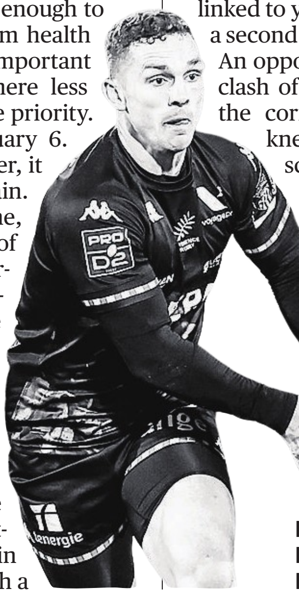
That was the turning point, that Friday night in Cardiff. They would change the system after that. The medics would have access to replays. For now, around me, there seemed to be an uproar. Why wasn't I taken off? Why didn't I go off myself?

You play rugby for Wales, you expect to get told, by strangers, where you're going wrong on the pitch, just as much as you'll be loved when it goes right. This was something else. It wasn't about the rugby or the results. It wasn't really Welsh supporters, very often. It was people I'd never met, with no medical experience, who had never examined me. Advice from the wild west of uninformed opinion. It all seemed to miss a fundamental truth: who, out of all these random strangers, was more concerned about my brain than me?

Not all elite sportspeople are academically gifted. But none of us are stupid enough to put the long-term health of our most important organ at anywhere less than an absolute priority. That was February 6. Seven weeks later, it happened again. Different game, different part of the pitch, different players. Different impact. Same result. I was playing for Northampton against Wasps at Franklin's Gardens. I was playing well. I'd scored one try and had just gone over in the left corner when Nathan Hughes jumped in late and caught me with a knee to the back of the head. He was sent off. I was properly out cold, again, treated on the pitch for several minutes, and then carried off on a stretcher.

Do those four incidents seem linked to you? A clash of heads with a second row on our 10-metre line. An opposition boot to the face. A clash of heads with a hooker by the corner flag. An opposition knee to the head after scoring a try. I wasn't making mistakes. I certainly wasn't repeatedly doing something stupid. I made tackles in every game. I attempted to score tries whenever I could. But something had to change.

Four concussions in



North, 33, is playing in France's second tier with Provence this season

even stand up to do the dishes

WILLIAM CANNARELLA FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Ten years on, North still sees the professor who helped him after the four concussions and is proactively trying to help protect his brain function

five months is bad news. No one cared about my brain as much as I did. I sat down with the Northampton medical staff, and I sat down with the Welsh Rugby Union. I told them I wanted to explore it all more – what had happened, how my head was, what we should do beyond the existing protocols.

Both organisations were very proactive. I was recommended a specialist. The first hint that I might be seeing the wrong man came when he talked about the patients he worked with. He was a specialist in the most traumatic things that can happen to a brain: cancers, vast surgeries, incurable diseases. Not concussions. Then, when I told him how I felt, there were no tests. No looking at my brain, no scans.

He just asked me about the impacts and how I experienced them. He told me to take a month off from proper rugby and come back to him. Basically, do an extended return-to-play protocol, spread out across four weeks.

I was not in a good place at this point. I felt a constant pressure in my head. I was sensitive to lights, and I was struggling with my balance. If I closed my eyes, I'd fall over. At times [girlfriend now wife] Becky [James] thought I must be taking the mickey. I was incapable of doing the washing-up, because I couldn't stand long enough and I couldn't cope with the noises and stimulation.

"Just take a month . . ." What was that based on? How was I supposed to recover? What happened when the month ended? None of it felt right. Sometimes I'd try to say a sentence and I'd get my words back to front. Not on a tongue-twister, but in an ordinary sentence. I'd try to say, "I'll meet you at three," and what would come out was, "I'll three meet you." I wouldn't even notice. Someone else would have to point it out to me.

It was late April now. The domestic season might have been coming to an end, but the Rugby World Cup was coming closer every week. Wales's opening game against Uruguay was on September 20. The final tournament squad was going to be announced on August 31; the training squad was coming out on June 1. All the time, the clock in my head ticking. The clock in my head with the minute and second hands going in opposite directions.

I wanted to be right for the World Cup. I wasn't going to put myself at any risk. These two positions didn't need to be opposing, but they had equal potency to me. So I went back to see the specialist, and I got the same troubling feeling that we were not in the right hands. Still no tests. He sort of looked at me, made some notes and then said: "Take another month, and extend it again."

And now my frustrations began to grow, because I could no longer figure out a safe way forward. I was trying to do the right things, at the exact point where outsiders seemed to be assuming I was doing the wrong things. I was in Northampton, my mum and dad were in Anglesey. Becky [a GB Olympic cyclist] was training hard at the velodrome in Manchester. I had a sister and her family in Northampton, and they were brilliant, but their lives were busy. For a lot of the time I was alone.

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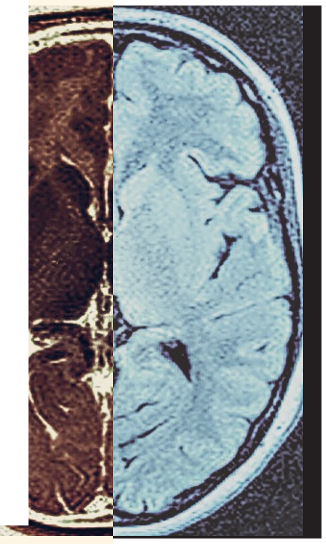
> **I felt a constant pressure in my head... if I closed my eyes, I'd fall over**



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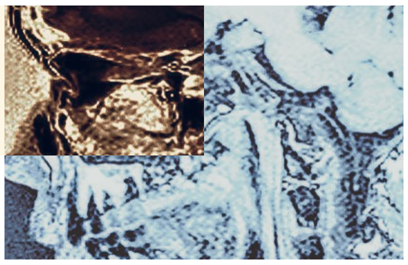
> **I'd go to Tesco for my shopping and four people would let me know where I was going wrong**



People made comparisons that made no sense. A few ex-players talked of their own experiences as if they were mine. I had every sympathy with how they felt and how they had been treated, but their game was not my game. There was an era when players did contact every day, not just skillset contact, but level three – the hardcore stuff. Lads would get knocked out in a game, get up and play on. They could be out cold, get a slap in the face and smelling salts under the nose, and be pushed back on. Afterwards they'd go out on the drink; they'd eat bad food, they'd do all those unpleasant bonding games that old rugby players liked to do.

Me? I was an academy kid. Even as schoolboys we had been told that a knock to the head meant we came off the field. "Don't put yourself at risk." "Make sure you're OK before playing." Of course I will. It's my brain. Who in their right mind would not? I lay there for hours one night, and I let the anger and frustrations lead me naturally to a point. Something had to change. I would have to be the one who changed it. I went back to the WRU, and I went back to Northampton. I asked for a second opinion. And that was when I met Professor Tony Belli for the first time. Professor Belli is director of the Surgical Reconstruction and Microbiology Research Centre at the University of Birmingham. He is a world-leading expert in concussion. And he was brilliant.

The first time I went to see him, I was there for five hours. We did a long series of different checks: cognitive tests, balance tests, maths, problem-solving. We did two MRI scans. I had blood tests. We looked at my saliva, since he was leading some research in the markers concussion can leave. When we had done all of that, we sat down and talked frankly about where I was and what my most pressing concerns were. At the end, we had a plan. It felt revolutionary. It felt like hope. Straight away I had a confidence that had been entirely absent before. "George, I've seen this before. I've seen it worse. I've seen it better. And this is how we go about it."

There are certain experts you speak to, and their knowledge is so obvious and their credentials so good you can't help but trust them. So when he said to me, you will have six months with no contact in training whatsoever, I didn't worry about what it meant for my World Cup chances. It was my World Cup chances. It was my career, if I still wanted one.

I met him every month after that. A check-up every time, an assessment. Building the information they had about me, finding the patterns and the long-term implications. All the while, the experts who had never met me were giving their thoughts to the media, and the media were amplifying them.

Everyone had an opinion. I'd go to Tesco for my shopping and four people would tell me where I was going wrong. I'd switch to Morrisons and five more would drop their thought-bombs on me. In a house by myself, with no proper training to throw myself into, it became hard not to start questioning myself at times. I went back to Anglesey to stay with Mum and Dad for a week, not to search my soul on long walks along the beach but just to escape my own head for a bit. They did all the mum and dad things that parents should do. They also communicated their own concerns and fears, because naturally they were reading the same stories as everyone else. Each morning there would be something new. Mum would come down for breakfast looking worried sick.

There were moments when I honestly thought about just jacking it all in. About going abroad and finding somewhere to hide away. That week I realised I had a choice. I could either bottle it up and become really angry and bitter about it all, or process it and

Continued on page 12➔

➔ Continued from page 11

deal with all that came with it. Because if I didn't, it was going to melt me to the core. One morning, I told my parents something else I'd said to Professor Belli at our first meeting. "Look, if you turn round to me today and say, 'George, it's not worth it. I can see a huge impact on your brain. There's a massive decrease in your cognitive function, your memory,' then I'll get up, shake your hand and I'll walk out and that's me done."

Then I told them his response. "George, I completely get it and I'd be the first person to tell you that. But at the moment, I know you've had four concussions in a short amount of time. But your brain health and your functions aren't showing deterioration. You can be OK."

So I stuck with him. I didn't go near contact in training. I did his tests, monitored all the things we should. Then we started the rehabbing: looking at ways to strengthen my neck muscles, and then the tendons and nerves that control the balance in your neck, so next time a knee or boot came calling or someone blindsided me there would be a limit to the whiplash movement of my head.

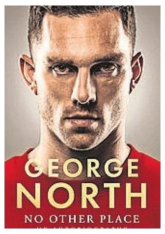
At the same time, I tried to work out how to deal with the well-meaning people who were making it all so much harder. I made the World Cup. I felt good. I felt better than before. When our race was done, I went back to see the Prof. I told him I'd like to carry on, even now there was no medical reason to – keep doing regular tests, keep monitoring. He told me we didn't need to. But, if I was comfortable with it, he'd facilitate it all. So that's what we did.

At the start and end of each season, I would go back to Birmingham to see him. The MRI scans, the cognitive and balance tests, the problem-solving. More work for the Prof, better for me. He was there for a phone call if I was ever worried about something; I could drop him an email if I wanted any testing. I felt protected.

The people who doubted me – somehow, they seemed to turn it back on me. Sometimes it felt like they just wanted to get stuff off their chests, and I was the public face of their chosen topic. The poster boy for the poster no one wants to be on. David Beckham and Freddie Ljungberg got Calvin Klein underwear. I got concussion.

So here we are, ten years on. I do my catch-ups with the Prof. He picks up my WhatsApps. He tells me that a cognitively challenged brain will always be healthier than a non-cognitively challenged brain, so I have a list of different games and brain-teasers that I do every day, just to keep my head ticking over.

I'm trying to learn French, with mixed results. I've gone deep into the world of supplements that help with cognitive function and brain health. I have businesses outside rugby, and I'm trying to learn from them all the time. Because it's my brain, and it's my life. Do you honestly think I would sit there and do nothing about my own health?



Exclusive extract from **No Other Place: My Autobiography** by George North, which is published by Harper Collins on Thursday

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Courageous Australia draw very best from the Red Roses

Women's World Cup

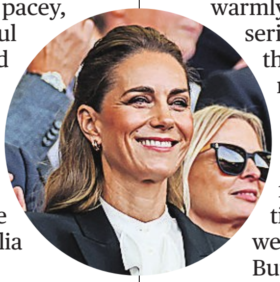
47-7

England | **Australia**

STEPHEN JONES

Rugby Correspondent
At Amex Stadium

Whatever you wanted from yesterday afternoon, even if you were an Australian, it was delivered in spades. England – delightful, dedicated, pacey, powerful England – are in the quarter-finals of the World Cup, where they will be joined by what is, on yesterday's evidence, a valiant and improving bunch in the green and gold. Australia refused to cave in.



If you wanted great rugby, but also a rich afternoon of all-round entertainment, then it was there for the taking. It bit you on both hands while you were applauding. There is something about Brighton & Hove Albion's stadium that seems to bring out the best in people, and the drama. On this evidence, I may even begin to support the football team. Well, a bit. From afar.

It all reminded you of why you started following rugby's uneven path in the first place – you arrived at the game full of hope and you left full of joy at what you had seen. Nothing pompous, nothing posed, nothing snide. Don't talk to me about what women's rugby can learn from the men's game. The lessons are all one way. The stadium was packed with 30,433 supporters, thrilled, amused, gripped. And exultant.

England will now play Scotland next Sunday in Bristol. Scotland are vastly improved, but for the leap they will need to make in seven days, they will need rocket power.

However, yesterday was no easy victory for England. Australia piled in quite magnificently. They were in the lead for a large portion of the first half. They get to reach the quarter-finals themselves. They deserved their celebrations on the final whistle as they are a courageous and athletic team.

Perhaps the only check on England's satisfaction might have come when Ellie Kildunne had to leave the field early in the second half after banging her head on the ground in a tackle. She did not return and faces a head-injury stand-down period of at least 12 days, so will miss the Scotland match. She is a player who, in the eyes of English rugby followers, is adored as avidly as the Beatles were in the past – and I mean all four of them put together.

She was definitely the darling of Brighton; she played with the usual devil and ambition. We saw some encouraging signs later in the half after she had to leave the pitch: she was pictured on the screens sitting in the stand; the crowd reacted to her warmly and she gave them all a series of regal waves. She is the sort of player who makes you yearn for the years when individual rugby players could turn games, could thrill even followers of the opposition. Let's hope she gets well soon.

But England have strength all round. In the first half, when Australia took the lead and came on strongly, the two English locks were awesome. Rosie Galligan had a whale of a game – in defence and at ruck time she was all over the field, hitting like a tank. Alongside her, Abbie Ward was still going strong at the very end, dominating the lineout and, perhaps in the eyes of observers, proving that she is one of the greatest England forwards that the sport has seen. Maybe she is the Martin Johnson of the Red Roses.

England scrummaged well when they were in their stride, Zoe Harrison was an able marshal and Sadia Kabeya contributed Herculean efforts, as well as two tries.

England will be anxious about the status of Kildunne and Hannah Botterman, who was replaced after suffering a problem with her back, but otherwise all the anxieties will be in the

Harrison landed six of her seven conversion kicks

Women's World Cup

Fixtures

Today
12pm Japan v Spain
2pm Italy v Brazil
2.45pm New Zealand v Ireland
4.45pm France v South Africa

Saturday
1pm Quarter-final 1 Winner Pool C v Runner-up Pool D
4pm Quarter-final 2 Canada v Australia

September 14
1pm Quarter-final 3 Winner Pool D v Runner-up Pool C
4pm Quarter-final 4 England v Scotland

September 19
7pm Semi-final 1 Winner QF1 v Winner QF2

September 20
3.30pm Semi-final 2 Winner QF3 v Winner QF4

September 27
12.30pm Bronze final Runner-up SF1 v Runner-up SF2

4pm Final Winner SF1 v Winner SF2

Results

August 22
England 69 USA 7

August 23
Australia 73 Samoa 0
Scotland 38 Wales 8
Canada 65 Fiji 7
France 24 Italy 0

SIMON KING/PROSPORTS/SHUTTERSTOCK

Bern goes over to score England's seventh try of a game in which the World Cup hosts had to come from behind, with the Princess of Wales watching on, inset

> ### This was no easy win for England. Australia piled in quite magnificently

other camps in this brilliant World Cup.

Australia were admirable. Siokapesi Palu was as good as any Englishwoman in the back row and their morale stayed to the end because England played dazzlingly in the final quarter, urgently trying to add to their score but they could not. In four years' time, they will be a real golden handful. On Saturday they play Canada. Battle ensigns will fly.

Strange things happened in Brighton. When players sadly had to leave the field – Botterman of England and Lydia Kavoa of Australia, for example – players on both sides applauded. It was a courtesy that teams always extended to disappearing players, and it was rather charming.

And we also had the remarkable sight in the first half of an Australian team scrummaging magnificently. A good Australian scrum has the same rarity value as a brilliant rock record by a French group, and warm applause for the television match official. However, Kavoa was clearly a vital component because in the first scrum after she went off, England thundered forward and Kabeya scored just before half-time.

Australia were a factor for long periods of the first half. They took a lead that England could only erase towards half-time and some of their kick-and-driving was excellent, notably when they worked Adiana Talakai over with a rasping drive to take that lead after only six minutes.

Jess Breach did score in the corner from England's first attack but it took a long time for the try machine to fire into action. Especially when Amy Cockayne dropped the ball in the act of scoring.

But eventually we heard the sound of English thunder. Ward scored after continual driving near the Australian line and, after another series of drives in the wake of the first dominant England scrum, Kabeya scored. Conversions by Zoe Harrison made it 19-7 after a half that had been a powerhouse in its confrontations and glorious in its action.

England added four more tries in the second half. Kabeya scored her second, from close range, and Kelsey Clifford, the prop, also scored twice, with Sarah Bern going over for England's seventh try. A special team on a special occasion. Powered by Galligan and Ward. Brighton rocks.

Scorers: England: Tries Breach (8min), Ward (32), Kabeya (38, 43), Clifford (53, 58), Bern (65). **Cons** Harrison 6. **Australia: Try** Talakai (6). **Con** Wood.

England E Kildunne (H Rowland 46min); A Dow, M Jones, T Heard (H Aitchison 62), J Breach, Z Harrison, N Hunt (L Packer 62); H Botterman (K Clifford 25), A Cokayne (L Atkin-Davies 54), M Muir (S Bern 54: sin-bin 71); R Galligan (L Campion 62), A Ward; M Talling (M Feaunati 57), S Kabeya, A Matthews.

Australia C Halse; M Stewart, G Friedrichs, T Pomare (C Smith 63), D Miller, F Moleka (sin-bin 53; T Hinds 63), S Wood; L Kavoa (F Pohiva 34; B O'Gorman 60), A Talakai (T Naden 41), A Karpani; K Leaney, M Leonard (A Codey 66); P Duck, A Marsters (E Chancellor 57), S Palu (T Tuinakauvadra 46).

Referee A Groizeleau (France).

August 24
Ireland 42 Japan 14
S. Africa 66 Brazil 6
N. Zealand 54 Spain 8

August 30
Canada 42 Wales 0
Scotland 29 Fiji 15
England 92 Samoa 3
USA 31 Australia 31

August 31
Ireland 43 Spain 27
N. Zealand 62 Japan 19
Italy 24 **S. Africa 29**
France 84 Brazil 5

Yesterday
Canada 40 Scotland 19
USA 60 Samoa 0
Wales 25 **Fiji 28**
England 47 Australia 7

Group tables

Pool A	P	W	D	L	PD	B	Pts
England (Q)	3	3	0	0	191	3	**15**
Australia (Q)	3	1	1	1	33	2	**8**
United States	3	1	1	1	-2	2	**8**
Samoa	3	0	0	3	-222	0	**0**

Pool B	P	W	D	L	PD	B	Pts
Canada (Q)	3	3	0	0	121	3	**15**
Scotland (Q)	3	2	0	1	23	2	**10**
Fiji	3	1	0	2	-69	1	**5**
Wales	3	0	0	3	-75	2	**2**

Pool C	P	W	D	L	PD	B	Pts
New Zealand (Q)	2	2	0	0	89	2	**10**
Ireland (Q)	2	2	0	0	44	2	**10**
Spain	2	0	0	2	-62	1	**1**
Japan	2	0	0	2	-71	0	**0**

Pool D	P	W	D	L	PD	B	Pts
South Africa (Q)	2	2	0	0	65	2	**10**
France (Q)	2	2	0	0	103	1	**9**
Italy	2	0	0	2	-29	2	**2**
Brazil	2	0	0	2	-139	0	**0**

Emotional Savea has final word to thwart Springboks' fightback

Rugby Championship

New Zealand	24
South Africa	17

Chris Jones

Ardie Savea claimed a match-winning turnover in his 100th Test as the All Blacks won a pulsating battle with the world champions at Eden Park. The Springboks came agonisingly close to at least grabbing a draw but Savea got his hands on the ball in the shadow of his own posts as most of the home fans exhaled in relief.

Savea has so often set the standard for the team and he was at his combative best against opponents who edged the scrum but left themselves with too much to do after trailing 14-3 at half-time.

Victory extended New Zealand's unbeaten run at the Auckland venue to 51 matches, a sequence that dates back to 1994.

Savea, who celebrated the turnover by shouting "my house" said: "It was a gutsy performance. I'm just proud of the boys' efforts."

He was presented with his silver 100th cap by his wife Saskia, and proclaimed: "To my family... I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for you guys. Every young person in this crowd, this is for you."

Jesse Kriel, the Springboks' captain, paid tribute to Savea before admitting: "We weren't up to scratch [with] way too many handling errors and things that just weren't up to standard for us."

Cobus Reinach made an impact as a replacement scrum half for South Africa, who will get a chance to bounce back when they face New Zealand in Wellington on Saturday.

A squall signalled the start of what was always going to be a torrid battle but, with just a minute played, the All Blacks delivered a try straight out of their pre-match play-book. Quick lineout ball was moved to Beauden Barrett, whose pinpoint cross-kick picked out Emoni Narawa on the right wing. With the Springboks' blitz defence tight in midfield, it left Willie le Roux as the only man able to tackle the wing who, after catching the ball low, slid through the full back's legs, got back to his feet and then dummied an inside pass to score a well-worked try that Barrett converted.

It was a statement of intent from the All Blacks who had done their homework on the Springboks' defensive structure.

Narawa was forced off with a rib injury after just six minutes, to be replaced by Damian McKenzie, and the home side then punished a loose Springbok kick with Barrett firing a 50-22 downfield. The lineout throw went over the top to Wallace Sititi who gave a no-look pass inside to the dangerous Will Jordan. The wing evaded Malcolm Marx's tackle and scored his 43rd try for his country, with McKenzie converting.

My house: Savea made sure Eden Park remained a fortress for New Zealand in his 100th Test

The All Blacks continued to pressure the Springboks ball carriers and McKenzie kicked a penalty as Rassie Erasmus started to use his replacements bench in a bid to change their attacking dynamic. It produced a massive scrum drive against the head that put Kwagga Smith within touching distance of the line, and the rest of the forwards piled in. Hooker Marx crashed over a few phases later with Pieter-Steph du Toit adding extra power to the drive.

The All Blacks turned down a kickable penalty from the subsequent kick-off, opting for the lineout, and their driving play brought another penalty and a yellow card for Smith for cynical play at the breakdown. After hammering away at the line, eventually the ball was moved out to replacement Quinn Tupaea who crashed over near the posts, with McKenzie's conversion bringing a sudden halt to the fightback.

The Springboks refused to give up hope and a clever kick from Damian de Allende forced the home side to concede a five-metre scrum that resulted in Reinach forcing his way over. The conversion made it a seven-point game with six minutes remaining but Savea's intervention ensured it remained that way.

Scorers: New Zealand: Tries Narawa (1min), Jordan (16), Tupaea (66). **Cons** J Barrett, McKenzie 2. **Pen** McKenzie (50) **South Africa**: **Tries** Marx (61), Reinach (73). **Cons** Feinberg-Mngomezulu 2. **Pen** Pollard (22).

New Zealand W Jordan; E Narawa (D McKenzie 6), B Proctor (Barrett 71), J Barrett (Q Tupaea 59), R Ioane; B Barrett, F Christie (K Preston 67); E De Groot (T Williams 40), C Taylor (S Taukei'aho 31), F Newell (T Lomax 45); S Barrett (capt), T Vaa'i; S Parker (F Holland 67), A Savea, W Sititi (D Kirifi 72).

South Africa W Le Roux (S Feinberg-Mngomezulu 47), C Kolbe, J Kriel (capt), D de Allende (H Pollard 74), C Moodie, H Pollard (E Hooker 58), G Williams (C Reinach 47); O Nche (B Venter 67), M Marx (J Wessels 67) T du Toit (W Louw 61), E Etzebeth, R Nortje (L de Jager 50), M van Staden, P-S Du Toit, S Kolisi (K Smith 51, sin-bin 64-74).

Referee K Dickson. **Attendance** 48,312.

Sabalenka triumphs in battle of the redemption plots

STUART FRASER

Tennis Correspondent

Amanda Anisimova at least put nine games on the scoreboard this time, but ultimately she was still far too inconsistent in another grand-slam final. A valiant effort was not enough to get the better of Aryna Sabalenka, who prevailed in straight sets to win a second US Open title and fourth grand-slam trophy.

Anisimova, 24, deserves much credit for the way she bounced back from being on the wrong end of a 6-0, 6-0 beating by Iga Swiatek in this year's Wimbledon final, knocking out the same opponent during a stirring run to the final at Flushing Meadows. But when it came to the crunch, the American's composure was lacking at the crucial moments of a 6-3, 7-6 (7-3) defeat by Sabalenka.

A total of 29 unforced errors to Sabalenka's 15 and five conceded breaks of serve sums up Anisimova's 94 minutes on the court. A clear sign of the uneasiness she felt also came with her bizarre complaints to the umpire Marijana Veljovic about the supposed blinding position of the floodlights above, which she claimed was causing her to abort the ball toss before her serve on several occasions.

Sabalenka, by contrast, maintained her focus to claim a first grand-slam title this year. She had let herself down in her two previous major finals at the Australian Open and the French Open this season, allowing her frustration to have a debilitating impact on her tennis, but there were no considerable meltdowns this time as she sealed another major trophy.

Although Sabalenka, 27, was the favourite coming into the match as the world No1, there was a challenging dynamic for her to handle through her history with the No 8 seed Anisimova, who had won six of their previous nine matches, including the semi-final at Wimbledon in July.

Sabalenka came under pressure on her serve in the opening game, but managed to hold before claiming the first break of serve for 2-0. Despite this early setback for Anisimova, there followed some relief when she won the next game with a hold of serve.

This briefly appeared to free Anisimova up for the big swings that she likes to take on her groundstrokes and she suddenly found her range, completing a run of three consecutive games with a break to move 3-2 ahead. But she could not keep it up and Sabalenka responded with four straight games to take the first set.

Unsettled and uncomfortable, Anisimova made her complaint about the lights, to which umpire Veljovic told her that they were in the same position throughout the tournament. It did little to pacify Anisimova, who replied: "That's ridiculous."

Anisimova held serve in the opening game of the second set but again made her frustration known, telling her coaching team: "I can't see the ball." Minutes later, she had her serve broken to go 2-1 down.

"There is nothing the umpire can do about the lights," Annabel Croft, the former British No 1 and BBC Radio 5 Live pundit, said. "Anisimova needs to not focus on that. You cannot serve if in the back of your head you already thinking you are going to miss."

Sabalenka was in full control at 3-1 up and seemingly on course for victory, but a dreadful service game at 3-2 handed back the break for 3-3. Anisimova failed to take advantage, though, by failing to hold her own serve in the next game. At 5-4 up with a break, Sabalenka had the chance to serve out the match, but the fluctuating pattern of the set continued. At 30-30 the Belarusian missed an overhead smash into the net, before Anisimova stepped up with her power on break point to level the set at 5-5.

Sabalenka did not unravel from here, crucially holding serve at 6-5 down to take the set into a tie-break. She has a tremendous tie-break record, winning 20 of her previous 21 this year, and she dominated this crucial period of the match, converting

'DON'T SHOW CROWD IF THEY BOO TRUMP'

US Open broadcasters have been asked not to show negative reactions to the US president Donald Trump at today's men's final. Trump is expected to attend the US Open for the first time since 2015, when he was booed by spectators.

An email from the organisers to broadcasters including Sky Sports read: "We ask all broadcasters to refrain from showing any disruptions or reactions in response to the president's attendance in any capacity."

Alcaraz-Sinner rivalry beating 'big three'

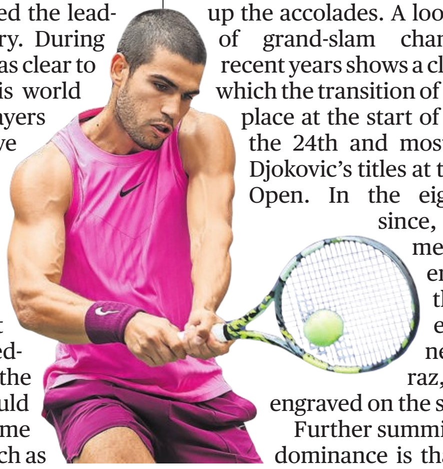
Stuart Fraser

We wondered if Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz could reach the heights of the fabled "big three", and already they have claimed a collective achievement that proved beyond Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer.

Before a ball is even hit, tonight's men's singles US Open final has made history in the open era as the first time the same two players have contested a third consecutive grand-slam final in the same season. Aged 24 and 22 respectively, Sinner and Alcaraz are well on track to put together one of the great rivalries in the history of tennis.

This is a fitting finish to the 2025 grand-slam season. After Alcaraz's triumph at the French Open and Sinner's revenge at Wimbledon comes the decider at Flushing Meadows in this effective best-of-three-match series, with the world No1 ranking at stake.

It is no big shock that Sinner and Alcaraz have established the leading active men's rivalry. During their teenage years it was clear to many within the tennis world that they were the players best equipped to move the sport forward into a new era.



Unquestionably, however, it is a surprise that they have become so dominant so soon. It was thought the retirements of Federer and Nadal, and the ageing of Djokovic, would allow others to taste some grand-slam success, such as an opportunity for Alexander Zverev to win a first major trophy at last or even a shock outsider.

In fact, Sinner and Alcaraz have progressed at a rapid pace and swept up the accolades. A look at the list of grand-slam champions in recent years shows a clear point at which the transition of power took place at the start of 2024, after the 24th and most recent of Djokovic's titles at the 2023 US Open. In the eight majors since, the tournament has ended with the name of either Sinner or Alcaraz, left, being engraved on the silverware.

Further summing up their dominance is that tonight's contest will be their 15th match against each other. Given that Federer famously once admitted he would rather play anyone else other than Nadal in the early stages of their rivalry, it begged the question as to whether Sinner and Alcaraz are starting to feel the same.

"Yes and no," Sinner said. "That's what Roger said and I feel like we all think the same way, but I love these challenges. I love to put myself in these positions. He [Alcaraz] is someone who pushed me to the limit, which is great, because then you have the best feedback you can have as a player. We have faced each other quite a lot now lately, so things are getting a little bit different. Always when we step on court, we are aware of more things. But sometimes it's also nice to not play against him."

Similar sentiments have also been

YUKI IWAMURA/AP

Sabalenka had lost six of her previous nine matches against Anisimova, including the Wimbledon semi-final between the pair in July

her third championship point at 6-3 with an unreturnable serve out wide.

The challenge next year for Sabalenka is taking her success to other surfaces. All four of her grand-slam titles have been on hard courts but her power game is also more than capable of doing damage on grass and clay if she can keep a lid on any frustration.

Earlier, Joe Salisbury and Neal Skupski agonisingly missed out on becoming the first all-British pair to win the US Open men's doubles in 122 years, failing to convert three championship points in yesterday's final.

Salisbury and Skupski were so close to emulating the triumph of Laurence and Reginald Doherty in 1903 at 5-4, 0-40 against serve in the deciding set against Spain's Marcel Granollers and Horacio Zeballos of Argentina, but could not quite get across the line. Within minutes they looked crestfallen after losing three consecutive games for a 3-6, 7-6 (7-4), 7-5 defeat.

This is the second time Salisbury and Skupski have lost a grand-slam final this year after being beaten by the same opponents in the French Open final.

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politely conveyed by Alcaraz in recent months. Sightings across the tour of warm greetings between the pair when they encounter each other behind the scenes would also suggest they are far from sick of each other, which may be a disappointment for those hoping for some needle akin to that between John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors.

"Off the court, we bump into each other at times," Sinner said. "I don't know if we are happy or not but, no, I think it's great. As I always say, we have a great relationship off the court."

The concern for the chasing pack behind Sinner and Alcaraz is that they continue to improve, as observed by one another. It was rightly thought in the past that Sinner's stamina was a little lacking, but a noticeable improvement has allowed him to sustain his high level of play throughout matches. "I think physically he has improved a lot," Alcaraz said.

Despite already having five grand-slam titles to his name, Alcaraz was often prone to fluctuations that would result in him tamely conceding sets in the early rounds. This fortnight he has ironed out that flaw, progressing to the final of a major without dropping a set for the first time. A key factor behind this is a more reliable serve, which has only been broken twice in six matches. "He has improved the serve a lot," Sinner said. "I feel like he's serving much better with the better pace, but the percentage is very high all the time."

ON TV TODAY

US Open men's singles final
7pm Sky Sports Tennis

Tackling gender head on

Boxing

Tom Kershaw

Luca Anna Hamori walked out into a cauldron of boos to face Imane Khelif in Paris last August as Olympic boxing's gender controversy reduced the competition to a dangerous circus.

Thirteen months later, on the relative haven of the docks in Liverpool, a sport that nearly lost its place at LA 2028 in the aftermath of the Paris Games is grappling to restore its credibility and step into a new era.

Hamori faced Kazakhstan's Aida Abikeyeva in the round of 32 on Friday and started impressively, taking the first round on all five judges' scorecards, but the momentum turned in the second as Abikeyeva's sharp footwork and cleaner punches clinched a close fight. The boxers hugged, there was a smattering of applause in the largely empty 11,000-seat arena, and the schedule continued, successfully and unremarkably.

This fortnight's World Championships is the biggest tournament since Paris and the first organised by World Boxing since the new governing body was approved by the IOC. The Russian-backed IBA, which instructed the two sex tests that allegedly confirmed Khelif had male chromosomes and disqualified the Algerian in 2023, was stripped of that role amid a litany of scandals, leaving the IOC to administrate boxing itself in Paris.

Crucially, the tournament has also marked the full launch of World Boxing's gender eligibility policy, although that process has not been without hitches either, after a dozen athletes, including the entire French women's team, missed the deadline to submit the results of a now mandatory sex test and were barred. The introduction of the policy is a vital step to ensure the farcical situation in Paris is not repeated. After the IOC refused to acknowledge the sex tests and allowed Khelif to compete, the Algerian's first opponent, Angela Carini, quit after just 46 seconds, citing fears for her health.

By the time Hamori faced Khelif in the quarter-finals, the controversy had become the subject of fierce cultural division. That was hardly how Hamori had envisaged realising her dream, although she stoked the fire, too, before the bout, posting images on social media of Khelif as a half-man, half-bull. Thousands of Algerian supporters jeered at her. Khelif won comfortably and went on to claim a gold medal that looks sure to be for ever tainted. "It was my first Olympics. I was so excited," Hamori says. "But when the draw happened I saw that if I win two fights, my opponent will be the girl from Algeria.

"I heard about the stories. I was at the World Championships in India [in 2023] when this all started [and Khelif was disqualified mid-tournament after the results of the sex test]. I did my best but it was so hard mentally.

"After the Olympics, I heard about the new tests and I was happy because I didn't think it was fair [in Paris] to all of the women boxers. I was so much more happy to come here."

Khelif has not fought since the Olympics and has appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) to overturn World Boxing's policy, rather than volunteer to undergo a sex test. Chinese Taipei's Lin Yu-ting, who also won a gold medal in Paris after allegedly returning the same test results as Khelif, has not fought again either.

Mike McAtee, World Boxing's acting secretary-general, stressed that the governing body believes the sport is safer as a result of the policy.

"We believe our policy is fair," he said. "It has good checks and balances. Ultimately, we understand everyone has a right to go to CAS. Every time a boxer gets in the ring, we are a combat sport, safety is our No1 concern. By having a solid policy, you're not going to make everyone happy, but these policies are built around health and safety."

Khelif and Lin were not the only notable absentees from the draw, though. The five-woman French team were excluded because they missed the deadline for sharing test results before the draw on Wednesday. The tests are banned in France under a 1994 bioethics law, so the French federation sent its team to a designated testing lab in Leeds last Monday. However, the results were not received in time.

In a statement the French federation described its "stupefaction and indignation" and said the laboratory recommended by World Boxing was "not up to the task of delivering the results on time".

On Friday a senior official of the Nigerian Boxing Federation showed The Sunday Times a draft of a letter to World Boxing in which he was demanding almost £20,000 in compensation to cover the team's flight and accommodation expenses after three boxers were excluded, having missed the deadline.

World Boxing notified the federations as early as May, and reiterated in July, that the tests were required and recommended they were not left until the last minute.

More than 200 female boxers from upwards of 60 nations heeded those instructions but McAtee said World Boxing would review how the process can be fine-tuned, especially for developing nations. "We're very sympathetic," McAtee said. "The boxers trained hard, they're here, they sacrificed. We want people to box, but we have to do it safely and by the rules."

The highlight of the competition on Friday was Aryan Saed Panah's surprise first-round stoppage victory over Fiji's Sakiusa Narara in the 85kg category. The Iranian refugee fled the country in 2022 and is hoping to represent the Olympic Refugee Team at LA 2028. After a revolving door of scandals that have plunged amateur boxing into an existential crisis, one of the five original sports of the ancient Olympics may finally be in the spotlight for the right reasons.

Hamori, left, beaten by Khelif in Paris, is relieved by the new tests

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Overton replaces Mahmood for final ODI

Cricket

Elizabeth Ammon

England have made one change for the third and final one-day international against South Africa at the Utilita Bowl today, with Jamie Overton replacing Saqib Mahmood.

It means they have decided to stick with the balance that puts the fifth bowling option in the hands of a combination of the part-time spin of Will Jacks and Jacob Bethell, who between them conceded 112 runs from ten overs in England's five-run defeat at Lord's on Thursday, with South Africa scoring 330 for eight.

South Africa have already won the series, but a victory for England would help their precarious situation regarding automatic qualification for the next 50-over World Cup in 2027.

England sit eighth in the ICC ODI rankings, clinging to the final automatic qualification berth for the World Cup. With South Africa and Zimbabwe guaranteed places as the hosts, only the top eight teams will progress directly. Should England slip any further, they would be forced into the qualifier tournament, a fate that once seemed inconceivable for the 2019 champions.

West Indies and Bangladesh, only a few points behind, have softer schedules in the next year, while England's run includes New Zealand in October and Sri Lanka in January, when they are likely to be missing several key players who will be rested after the Ashes, before a tough home series against India at the start of next summer. They have only won ten of 31 matches in this format since the 2023 World Cup, so every opportunity to gather ranking points is critical.

Ben Duckett will play today but has been pulled out of the T20 series. The England opener has looked increasingly fatigued since the end of the India Test series. Sam Curran is a late addition to the T20 squad.

ON TV TODAY

England v South Africa, third ODI
11am Sky Sports Cricket

ALAN CROWHURST/GETTY IMAGES

Doncaster Racecourse has been the home of the St Leger since 1778, two years after the oldest of the sport's five classics was founded

'We'd live in a ghost town'

– how tax fears are haunting a racing community

The St Leger Festival returns at Doncaster but jockeys, trainers and business owners are concerned the historic event, and the whole sport, is about to be plunged into crisis

TOM KERSHAW

The St Leger Festival has been the lifeblood of Doncaster for almost 250 years. Each September, the greying city centre is revitalised for the prestigious meeting, the struggling restaurants fill their coffers for the winter months, and the jam-packed hotels pay off their bills after the quiet summer holidays.

"Without the racing, there wouldn't be anyone here. Doncaster would be a ghost town," says Simon Longworth, whose family have owned the Regent Hotel for 90 years. Joshua Wilsdon, manager of The Salutation, a pub less than a mile from the racecourse, where paintings of 18th century bloodstock auctions adorn the walls, sings from the same hymn sheet. "Without it, maybe we'd be shutting the doors before the end of the year," he says.

This year alone, the four-day festival is expected to draw about 50,000 visitors to Doncaster and contribute upwards of £25 million to the economy. Be it via the racecourse staff, its predominantly local suppliers or the hospitality sector, most people in the city have a connection to the sport.

"It's not just horses running on a track on television. It's this huge ecosystem. It's human lives," says Rachel Harwood, executive director of the racecourse, which employs 140 people all year, a figure that goes up to 2,000 during the St Leger meet.

But behind the merry façade of bunting disguising the alarming number of boarded up shops – 1,730 businesses closed in Doncaster in 2023 – the racing industry and all those reliant on it fear a sport attended by nearly five million people a year, second only to football, is about to be plunged into crisis.

Sir Keir Starmer attended the St Leger itself, the festival's flagship race, last year with his wife, Victoria, whose grandmother used to live by the racecourse. "There aren't many better days out than the races in the sunshine," the prime minister said at the time. But the Treasury is now proposing to raise the 15 per cent tax on betting on sports to 21 per cent – the same as the rate on online casino games. Betting revenue almost single-handedly underpins racing's prize money in the UK, with bookmakers paying an additional 10 per cent levy on their gross annual profits back into the industry, along with sponsorship and media rights fees. The betting turnover for racing is already down 16.5 per cent since 2022 and experts believe bookmakers would offset the impact of a tax hike by increasing prices, cutting bonuses and reducing advertising, while further pushing online gaming, which has significantly lower overheads and fixed margins.

Few trainers are actually based in Doncaster but Malton, about 60 miles north, is a hotbed. Julie Camacho, who runs Star Cottage yard with her husband, Steve Brown, became the first female trainer in Britain to surpass the £1 million mark in prize money in a season in 2023. However, the pair lost money in November, December and January because they did not want to lay off their 25-strong staff over the winter.

"The books didn't look healthy, as our accountant kept telling me," she says. The yard has around 65 horses in training and Camacho takes 10 per cent of the prize money won on top of a daily fee of £49 per horse, but it is still a balancing act.

"The prize money can't go down. It's already too low," Brown adds. "Racing is relentless. We work between 60 and 80 hours a week just to try to maintain where we are, not improve. The alarm goes off at half four every morning. We feel fortunate to have great owners, but this is a very tough time [for the industry]. There is a line where they will say this doesn't make sense. I'm not convinced the politicians making these decisions understand what goes into it."

Martin Cruddace, chief executive of Arena Racing, which owns 16 racecourses, including Doncaster, claims a tax rise would "push us towards the precipice".

"Our prize money is basically from the levy and what we put in," he says. "Doncaster is our only race course that makes money without income from betting, and it would not make very much. This tax would accelerate further decline and there comes a point where there are going to be big impacts on prize money, which is then taken out of the mouths of own-

Padgett says changes are likely to penalise those who are already worse off ers and trainers – and not the big ones, the people that saddle their own horses and drive their own horse boxes home late at night. They're the ones that are going to be really hit and I hate to cry wolf, but I think this is an existential threat to UK horse racing.

"We would become the world leader in online casino games and the world pauper in horse racing, which we basically invented, and I can't believe the government wants that."

Economic analysis commissioned by the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) estimated the proposed 21 per cent tax rate would cause a £330 million loss in revenue to the industry in its first five years and put 2,752 jobs at risk in the first year alone. Although the top and tails at Royal Ascot and an influx of Middle-Eastern wealth portrays a certain illusion of British racing, the broader reality is that the vast majority of trainers, jockeys and stable staff are already struggling as the number of horses in training – roughly 15,000 – declines due to rising costs and stagnating prize money. There are, at present, 600 licensed trainers and 59 racecourses in the UK, and midweek meetings at less-illustrious venues can stage races with as few as four runners watched by little more than 100 attendees.

The Sunday Times revealed last month that British racing will take the unprecedented step of going on strike on Wednesday – the eve of the St Leger Festival – to stress the state of alarm, with meetings at Carlisle, Uttoxeter, Kempton and Lingfield Park all cancelled in protest. The first voluntary blackout in the sport's modern history is still expected to cost the industry around £200,000 after the events have been rescheduled, and has been unanimously backed at all levels of a sport prone to splitting into factions.

In the weighing room, Kieran Shoemark, who rode two winners at Royal Ascot in June, says there is an "element of uncertainty and panic amongst my colleagues". Flat racing jockeys are paid a fixed fee of £167.67 per race and, as a general rule of thumb, receive around 8.5 per cent of winning prize money and 2.6 per cent of placed prize money.

Leading jockeys like Shoemark will race upwards of 600 times per year, but the average jockey will get around 300 rides. That puts their basic wage before bonuses at around £50,000 before tax, but a host of deductions including insurance and fees to their agent (10 per cent), the riders' union (3 per cent), and the valets who handle their equipment (5-10 per cent) means around a quarter of those earnings are immediately lost. Then, there is the travel between racecourses, with Shoemark racking up 60,000 miles during the summer season.

"I always wanted to be a jockey. I don't have qualifications in anything else and it's deeply concerning – if the government doesn't reconsider this tax, then I believe it's impossible for our sport to thrive," Shoemark says. "There is going to be less and less prize money, less and less rides. I feel for the teenagers wanting to be jockeys, but it's not just young people. We are all going to struggle and, if the owners don't want to get involved because there is no return, there's no horse racing."

Starmer and his wife, Victoria, enjoyed the racing at last year's St Leger

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> **It's not just horses running on a track. It's this huge ecosystem. It's human lives**

Rachael Maskell, MP for York Central, who was suspended by the Labour Party in July for opposing cuts to disability benefits, has backed the tax proposal, much to Brown's bemusement. "She's clearly not aware of what's going on on her own doorstep. We're 15 minutes down the road from York. She doesn't represent us," Brown says.

Doncaster Central and Doncaster North are Labour strongholds – Ed Miliband has been MP for the latter since 2005. Gordon Brown, the former prime minister, has backed a separate plan, proposed by the Institute for Public Policy Research, to raise certain betting taxes, such as the duty on online and physical gaming, from 21 per cent to 50 per cent, which he said could raise £3.2 billion a year without harming racing.

The cost of raising racehorses – an area in which Britain arguably remains the world leader – has also risen dramatically. Ivo Thomas is the stud manager at Tweenhills Farm in Gloucester, the home of Qatar Racing. He estimates that general keep now costs around £12,000 a year before vet fees. Then, there is the stallion nomination – a fee to breed one of their mares with a specific stallion – which can range from £20,000 to £350,000 depending on its lineage.

The meeting is vital to the hotel run by Longworth, above, while Harwood, top, will employ 2,000 staff at the racecourse this week

"You can be spending £50,000 a year easily to look after a mare and get a live foal out to sell," Thomas says. Tweenhills is one of the top bloodstock operations in the country and has more than 100 mares. Last month, it sold one of its yearlings for just over £1 million at auction to an American group, but the figures involved mean smaller farms that have passed down through generations without overseas backing are being squeezed out.

The bottom line if the tax rise comes into effect is that an industry that directly and indirectly supports 85,000 jobs and has been a time-honoured pillar of British culture will continue to shrink. While the St Leger, which was founded by British Army officer Anthony St Leger in 1776, takes place next week, Colonel Stephen Padgett OBE will continue to prepare the next generation of trainers, jockeys and stable staff at the National Horseracing College in Doncaster.

A former commander of the British Army in Afghanistan, his batch of 45 new "recruits" every three months work six days a week from 6am to 8.30pm to mimic the intensity and demands of a real yard.

The college is propped up by money it receives from the 10 per cent Horserace Betting Levy and the students are primarily 16 to 24-year-olds who have often struggled in the traditional school system and pay only a nominal £500 fee, which covers all of their food and accommodation, if their household income is below £27,000.

"The vast majority will go into placements in yards up and down the country but, if the betting tax as discussed brings about a significant reduction in legal betting, the young people that come to us might not be able to seize those life-changing opportunities," Padgett says. "Those who are least able to do other things would be the most unfairly penalised.

"People are genuinely very concerned because when you take all of the threats that racing faces, it is not impossible that it could decline over the next 20 years to the point where it's unsustainable."

Verstappen records F1's fastest lap to take pole

Italian Grand Prix

MOLLY HUDSON

Motor Racing Reporter
Monza

This may be a title fight between two McLarens with very little between them, but you can never rule out Max Verstappen being a thorn in their side. At the "Temple of Speed" the world champion set the fastest lap in Formula 1 history with an effort clocked at an average of 164.484mph.

After the first flying laps of qualifying at Monza, three different teams were at the top of the timesheets – Red Bull, Ferrari and McLaren – in one of the most unpredictable sessions of the season. Verstappen, right, prevailed with the first pole of Red Bull's new era under Laurent Mekies.

What that will look like remains to be seen, but with Verstappen at the wheel they have a world-class talent and this was a brilliant lap, 0.077sec quicker than Lando Norris, with Oscar Piastri, the championship leader, in third. He broke the lap speed record set by Lewis Hamilton, driving for Mercedes, at Monza in 2020, finishing the lap 0.095sec faster than the Briton in 1min 18.792sec.

This was certainly not the processional one-two some Saturdays have turned into this season. "It was a solid lap without being amazing," Piastri said of his attempt. "It's been clear for us that the competition has been much tighter this weekend."

Norris had admitted that "sometimes just playing the safe card is not good enough" with a 34-point championship deficit to Piastri, but no one can risk quite as much as Verstappen, title prospects gone for the season and effectively racing with nothing to lose. "It is never a surprise with Max," Norris said.

The possibility of keeping both McLarens behind him during today's race is another matter for Verstappen.

"This season so far the race [pace] hasn't always been great," Verstappen said. "I hope I can do something, but it's been a great day for us." It was a promising turnaround given last year at this circuit Verstappen called his Red Bull an "undriveable monster".

Ferrari could only manage fourth and fifth in front of their passionate Tifosi home fans, and Hamilton will be relegated to tenth, serving his five-place grid penalty after failing to slow "significantly" for double yellow flags on the way to the grid in Zandvoort last weekend.

It is particularly important to get a slipstream at this ultra-low downforce circuit, and all the teams and drivers were attempting to avoid being the first car on track, with such fine margins between competitors.

Ferrari decided against essentially sacrificing Hamilton's lap (knowing he had to serve a penalty regardless) to give Charles Leclerc a tow. It was an underwhelming session for both drivers, with Hamilton nonetheless delighted at realising a childhood dream of pulling out of the garage in Ferrari red for a competitive session at the team's spiritual home.

"It's pretty incredible to see the love that people in this country have for this team. There's nothing else like it," Hamilton said.

Mercedes fell away after looking promising early on, with George Russell frustrated that he was given soft tyres, having preferred to risk running the medium – as he informed his race engineer as he left the garage. It proved to be a miscommunication, with Russell believing the agreed "plan" was for the medium, when it was actually for the softs.

Norris gave himself an unnecessary scare in the second part of qualifying, cutting the chicane at the first corner after locking up and wasting a set of new tyres. That meant he was the very last car on track, needing to register a strong lap or be eliminated, and with the help of a tow from his team-mate he scraped through in fifth. "I was hitting every kerb possible that I didn't want to hit," Norris said, before managing to pull together a strong final lap.

He has dealt with last week's DNF positively knowing that the failure which caused him to retire in the Dutch Grand Prix was out of his control rather than his own mistake.

Grid for the Italian Grand Prix

	Driver	Team	Time
1	**Max Verstappen (Neth)**	Red Bull	**1:18.792**
2	**Lando Norris (GB)**	McLaren	**1:18.869**
3	**Oscar Piastri (Aus)**	McLaren	**1:18.982**
4	**Charles Leclerc (Monaco)**	Ferrari	**1:19.007**
5	**George Russell (GB)**	Mercedes	**1:19.157**
6	**Kimi Antonelli (It)**	Mercedes	**1:19.200**
7	**Gabriel Bortoleto (Br)**	Sauber	**1:19.390**
8	**Fernando Alonso (Sp)**	Aston Martin	**1:19.424**
9	**Yuki Tsunoda (Japan)**	Red Bull	**1:19.519**
10	**Lewis Hamilton (GB)***	Ferrari	**1:19.124**
11	**Oliver Bearman (GB)**	Haas	**1:19.446**
12	**Nico Hülkenberg (Ger)**	Sauber	**1:19.498**
13	**Carlos Sainz Jr (Sp)**	Williams	**1:19.528**
14	**Alexander Albon (Thai)**	Williams	**1:19.583**
15	**Esteban Ocon (Fr)**	Haas	**1:19.707**
16	**Isack Hadjar (Fr)**	Racing Bulls	**1:19.917**
17	**Lance Stroll (Can)**	Aston Martin	**1:19.948**
18	**Franco Colapinto (Arg)**	Alpine	**1:19.992**
19	**Pierre Gasly (Fr)**	Alpine	**1:20.103**
20	**Liam Lawson (NZ)**	Racing Bulls	**1:20.279**

* five-place grid penalty

Championship standings

	Driver	Pts
1	Oscar Piastri (Aus)	309
2	Lando Norris (GB)	275
3	Max Verstappen (Neth)	205
4	George Russell (GB)	184
5	Charles Leclerc (Monaco)	151
6	Lewis Hamilton (GB)	109
7	Kimi Antonelli (It)	64
8	Alexander Albon (Thai)	64
	Constructor	
1	McLaren	584
2	Ferrari	260
3	Mercedes	248
4	Red Bull	214
5	Williams	80

Sport

FOOTBALL RESULTS

PREMIER LEAGUE

	Total						Home						Away							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	P	W	D	L	F	A	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
1 Liverpool	3	3	0	0	8	4	2	2	0	0	5	2	1	1	0	0	3	2	4	**9**
2 Chelsea	3	2	1	0	7	1	2	1	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	5	1	6	**7**
3 Arsenal	3	2	0	1	6	1	1	1	0	0	5	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	5	**6**
4 Tottenham	3	2	0	1	5	1	2	1	0	1	3	1	1	1	0	0	2	0	4	**6**
5 Everton	3	2	0	1	5	3	1	1	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	3	3	2	**6**
6 Sunderland	3	2	0	1	5	3	2	2	0	0	5	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	**6**
7 Bournemouth	3	2	0	1	4	4	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	1	0	1	3	4	0	**6**
8 Crystal Palace	3	1	2	0	4	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	1	1	0	3	0	3	**5**
9 Man Utd	3	1	1	1	4	4	2	1	0	1	3	3	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	**4**
10 Nottm Forest	3	1	1	1	4	5	2	1	0	1	3	4	1	0	1	0	1	1	-1	**4**
11 Brighton	3	1	1	1	3	4	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	0	0	1	0	2	-1	**4**
12 Leeds	3	1	1	1	1	5	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	5	-4	**4**
13 Man City	3	1	0	2	5	4	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	1	5	2	1	**3**
14 Burnley	3	1	0	2	4	6	1	1	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	2	6	-2	**3**
15 Brentford	3	1	0	2	3	5	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	2	2	5	-2	**3**
16 West Ham	3	1	0	2	4	8	1	0	0	1	1	5	2	1	0	1	3	3	-4	**3**
17 Newcastle	3	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	0	1	2	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	-1	**2**
18 Fulham	3	0	2	1	2	4	1	0	1	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	1	3	-2	**2**
19 Aston Villa	3	0	1	2	0	4	2	0	1	1	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	1	-4	**1**
20 Wolves	3	0	0	3	2	8	2	0	0	2	2	7	1	0	0	1	0	1	-6	**0**

NEXT FIXTURES

Saturday (3.0 unless stated): Arsenal v Nottm Forest (12.30); Bournemouth v Brighton; Brentford v Chelsea (8.0); Crystal Palace v Sunderland; Everton v Aston Villa; Fulham v Leeds; Newcastle v Wolves; West Ham v Tottenham (5.30).

Sunday, Sept 14 Burnley v Liverpool (2.0); Man City v Man Utd (4.30).

Saturday, Sept 20 (3.0 unless stated): Brighton v Tottenham; Burnley v Nottm Forest; Fulham v Brentford (8.0); Liverpool v Everton (12.30); Man Utd v Chelsea (5.30); West Ham v Crystal Palace; Wolves v Leeds. **Sunday, Sept 21** Arsenal v Man City (4.30); Bournemouth v Newcastle (2.0); Sunderland v Aston Villa (2.0).

CHAMPIONSHIP

NEXT FIXTURES

Friday Ipswich v Sheffield Utd (8.0). **Saturday** (3.0 unless stated): Charlton v Millwall (12.30); Oxford Utd v Leicester (12.30); Preston v Middlesbrough (12.30); Coventry v Norwich; Sheffield Wednesday v Bristol City; Stoke v Birmingham; Swansea v Hull; Watford v Blackburn; West Bromwich Albion v Derby; Wrexham v Queens Park Rangers. **Sunday, Sept 14** Southampton v Portsmouth (midday).

WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

Group F

ARMENIA 0 **PORTUGAL 5**
Félix 10, 61
Ronaldo 21, 46
Cancelo 32
HT: 0-3 **Att**: 14,403

IRELAND 2 **HUNGARY 2**
Ferguson 49 Varga 2
Idah 90+3 Sallai 15
HT: 0-2
Sent off: Sallai (Hungary) 52

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Portugal	1	1	0	0	5	**3**
Hungary	1	0	1	0	0	**1**
Ireland	1	0	1	0	0	**1**
Armenia	1	0	0	1	-5	**0**

Group H

AUSTRIA 1 **CYPRUS 0**
Sabitzer 54 (pen)
HT: 0-0

SAN MARINO 0 **BOSNIA-HERZ 6**
Tahirovic 21
Dzeko 70, 72
Bazdar 81
Alajbegovic 85
Mujakic 90
HT: 0-1
Sent off: Golinucci (San Marino) 16

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Bosnia-H	4	4	0	0	9	**12**
Austria	3	3	0	0	6	**9**
Romaniaa	4	2	0	2	4	**6**
Cyprus	4	1	0	3	-2	**3**
S Marino	5	0	0	5	-17	**0**

Group K

ENGLAND 2 **ANDORRA 0**
C García 25 (og), Rice 67
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 39,202 (at Villa Park)

LATVIA 0 **SERBIA 1**
Vlahovic 12
HT: 0-1 **Att**: 6,238

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
England	4	4	0	0	8	**12**
Serbia	3	2	1	0	4	**7**
Albania	4	1	2	1	1	**5**
Latvia	4	1	1	2	-3	**4**
Andorra	5	0	0	5	-10	**0**

Today (7.45 unless stated): **Group A** Germany v Northern Ireland; Luxembourg v Slovakia. **Group E** Georgia v Bulgaria (2.0); Turkey v Spain. **Group G** Lithuania v Netherlands (5.0); Poland v Finland. **Group J** Belgium v Kazakhstan; North Macedonia v Liechtenstein (5.0).

LEAGUE ONE

Doncaster Rovers moved level on points with leaders Cardiff City as they ended Bradford City's unbeaten record with a 3-1 win (Peter Wilson writes). The visitors would have gone to the summit with a victory but Billy Sharp hit the third, scoring for the ninth consecutive league game against Bradford City.

Huddersfield Town came from behind to win a sixth successive home game, defeating bottom side Peterborough United 3-2. It was an eighth defeat in nine games this term for Peterborough, adding more pressure on their manager, Darren Ferguson. Joe Taylor struck the hosts' crucial third not long after he added a contender to any "miss of the season" competition by hitting the post with the goal at his mercy.

Plymouth Argyle recorded their second league win of the season, 4-2 against Stockport County, whose striker, Kyle Wootton, struck for both sides. He opened the scoring to put the hosts in front when he slipped and headed a corner into his own net. He also closed the scoring with a low shot into the same net, but this time for his own team.

Port Vale have failed to win any of their opening seven matches for the first time since 1967-68. They were defeated 3-2 at home by Leyton Orient, with Charlie Wellens, son of the head coach, Richie, scoring the winner in stoppage time.

Wycombe Wanderers got off the mark with their first win of the league campaign, 2-0 against Mansfield Town. Cauley Woodrow, on loan from Luton Town, marked his debut with the second goal, a penalty.

AFC Wimbledon had two players sent off in their 3-0 defeat away to Bolton Wanderers. Marcus Browne went after a poor challenge on Max Conway and Joe Lewis for a second yellow card. There was a red card each for Lincoln City and Wigan Athletic in a 2-2 draw. James Collins's opener for Lincoln was the 200th league goal of his career.

Danzel Hall's volley high into the net gave Rotherham United a 1-0 win against Exeter City.

BOLTON 3 **AFC WIMBLEDON 0**
Burstow 29, Cozier-Duberry 53
Randall 62
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 20,157
Sent off: Browne 50, Lewis 90 (both AFC Wimbledon)

DONCASTER 3 **BRADFORD CITY 1**
Molyneux 6, Gibson 22 Swan 12
Sharp 44
HT: 3-1 **Att**: 11,191

HUDDERSFIELD 3 **PETERBOROUGH 2**
Alves 60, Kane 67 Morgan 47
Taylor 90+1 Hayes 90+8
HT: 0-0 **Att**: 16,383

LINCOLN CITY 2 **WIGAN 2**
Collins 31 (pen), 34 Mullin 10, Wright 50
HT: 2-1 **Att**: 8,208
Sent off: Saydee (Wigan) 68; Street (Lincoln City) 77

PLYMOUTH 4 **STOCKPORT 2**
Wootton 24 (og), Watts 39 Norwood 45+1 (pen)
Ibrahim 48, Tolaj 75 Wootton 90+5
HT: 2-1 **Att**: 15,719

PORT VALE 2 **LEYTON ORIENT 3**
Croasdale 7 Connolly 13, Ballard 44
Cole 52 Wellens 90+5
HT: 1-2 **Att**: 7,721

ROTHERHAM 1 **EXETER 0**
Hall 39
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 7,699

WYCOMBE 2 **MANSFIELD 0**
Bell 14, Woodrow 52 (pen)
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 5,080

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
1 Cardiff	6	5	1	0	11	1	10	**16**
2 Doncaster	7	5	1	1	9	5	4	**16**
3 Huddersfield	7	5	0	2	14	8	6	**15**
4 Stevenage	6	5	0	1	9	4	5	**15**
5 Bradford City	7	4	2	1	11	9	2	**14**
6 Barnsley	6	4	1	1	11	7	4	**13**
7 Luton	6	4	0	2	8	3	5	**12**
8 Lincoln City	7	3	3	1	10	8	2	**12**
9 Stockport	7	3	2	2	12	11	1	**11**
10 Bolton	7	2	4	1	9	6	3	**10**
11 Mansfield	7	3	1	3	11	9	2	**10**
12 Leyton Orient	7	3	1	3	9	12	-3	**10**
13 Exeter	7	3	0	4	9	7	2	**9**
14 Wigan	7	2	3	2	10	9	1	**9**
15 AFC Wimbledon	7	3	0	4	8	9	-1	**9**
16 Northampton	6	2	1	3	4	6	-2	**7**
17 Rotherham	6	2	1	3	5	8	-3	**7**
18 Plymouth	7	2	0	5	8	15	-7	**6**
19 Wycombe	7	1	2	4	7	9	-2	**5**
20 Reading	6	1	2	3	5	9	-4	**5**
21 Burton Albion	5	1	1	3	5	9	-4	**4**
22 Blackpool	6	1	1	4	7	13	-6	**4**
23 Port Vale	7	0	2	5	4	9	-5	**2**
24 Peterborough	7	0	1	6	4	14	-10	**1**

NEXT FIXTURES

Saturday (3.0 unless stated): AFC Wimbledon v Rotherham; Barnsley v Reading; Bradford City v Huddersfield (12.30); Burton Albion v Lincoln City; Exeter v Port Vale; Leyton Orient v Bolton; Luton v Plymouth; Mansfield v Stevenage; Northampton v Blackpool (12.30); Peterborough v Wycombe; Stockport v Cardiff; Wigan v Doncaster.

NATIONAL LEAGUE

ALDERSHOT 2 **BRACKLEY 2**
Barrett 41 Byrne 66 (pen)
Taylor 84 Lowe 82
HT: 1-0
Sent off: Jackson (Aldershot) 65

ALTRINCHAM 2 **SUTTON UTD 1**
Knowles 53, Gale 81 Nadesan 23
HT: 0-1

BOREHAM WOOD 3 **MORECAMBE 0**
Richardson 8, Rush 37, 67
HT: 2-0
Sent off: Agyemang (Morecambe) 45+3

BOSTON 1 **SOLIHULL MOORS 2**
Hiwula 44 Wakeling 16, 79
HT: 1-1

CARLISLE 3 **TRURO 0**
Armstrong 11, 13, Linney 61
HT: 2-0

FOREST GREEN 1 **HARTLEPOOL 0**
Mitchell 24
HT: 1-0

ROCHDALE 2 **BRAINTREE 0**
Dieseruvwe 27, 33
HT: 2-0

SCUNTHORPE A **WEALDSTONE A**
Beestin 32 Boldewijn 7
Whitehall 40
HT: 2-1 *abandoned*

SOUTHEND 3 **HALIFAX 0**
Dallas 32
Scott-Morriss 90
Goodliffe 90+15
HT: 1-0
Sent off: Alimi-Adetoro (Halifax) 69

TAMWORTH 1 **EASTLEIGH 0**
Duku 50
HT: 0-0
Sent off: Eweka (Eastleigh) 30; Donkor (Tamworth) 77

WOKING 5 **GATESHEAD 0**
O'Brien 12, Hinds 25
Andrews 62, Osude 74, 90
HT: 2-0

YEOVIL 1 **YORK 3**
McCormick 78 Pearce 26 (pen)
Banks 35, Wannell 83 (og)
HT: 0-2

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1 Forest Green	8	6	2	0	11	**20**
2 Rochdale	7	6	0	1	11	**18**
3 Carlisle	8	5	2	1	11	**17**
4 Southend	8	5	2	1	9	**17**
5 Boreham Wood	7	4	2	1	4	**14**
6 Hartlepool	8	3	4	1	6	**13**
7 Altrincham	8	4	0	4	1	**12**
8 Wealdstone	7	4	0	3	1	**12**
9 Scunthorpe	5	3	2	0	4	**11**
10 Tamworth	7	3	1	3	0	**10**
11 Gateshead	8	3	1	4	-10	**10**
12 Aldershot	8	2	3	3	5	**9**
13 York	5	2	3	0	4	**9**
14 Brackley	7	2	3	2	0	**9**
15 Eastleigh	7	3	0	4	-1	**9**
16 Woking	8	2	2	4	-1	**8**
17 Halifax	8	2	2	4	-6	**8**
18 Yeovil	8	2	1	5	-5	**7**
19 Boston	7	2	1	4	-5	**7**
20 Braintree	8	2	1	5	-7	**7**
21 Solihull Moors	8	1	3	4	-7	**6**
22 Sutton Utd	8	1	2	5	-7	**5**
23 Truro	8	1	1	6	-8	**4**
24 Morecambe	5	1	0	4	-10	**3**

Today's racecards

Fontwell Park

Going: good-good to soft in places **Sky Sports Racing**

Rob Wright's tips: 2.12 Shantou Lucky **2.42** King's Reign **3.12** Blackacre **3.42** Pahlavi **4.12** Lermoos Legend **4.42** Baileys Big Image

2.12 SOUTHERN CRANES AND ACCESS CONDITIONAL JOCKEYS' HANDICAP HURDLE £3,248: 2M 6F (9)

1	P3-050	**BARROW RANGER** 30 (P) J J Hanlon (Ire) 4-12-0	P Hanlon (3)
2	2-4655	**JACK THE SAVAGE** 45 (P,T) L Horsfall 8-11-9	L Saunders (3)
3	6/PP42	**LOCKED DOWN LAD** 18 J Tickle 5-11-1	C Pritchard
4	640-5P	**SHANTOU LUCKY** 66 (T,V) James Owen 8-10-10	N Howie
5	1P36-4	**INSPECTOR LYNLEY** 123 (H,P,D) N Mulholland 8-10-9	Harriet Tucker (3)
6	4066-0	**GHOST PEPPER** 87 (P) D J Jeffreys 5-10-7	J Brace
7	434-53	**BEBSIDE BANTER** 18 (P) M Comley 8-10-6	F Mitchell
8	1/65P-	**HE IS A CRACKER** 373 (T) F Brennan 9-10-6	Isabelle Ryder (5)
9	POP-5P	**OF CORSE I CAN** 7 (P) N Mulholland 8-10-2	B Harris

Betting: 2-1 Locked Down Lad, 7-2 Barrow Ranger, 4-1 Bebside Banter, 10-1 Shantou Lucky, Inspector Lynley, 12-1 others

2.42 V2 RADIO MAIDEN HURDLE £4,193: 2M 3F (11)

1	43/60-	**CHEDINGTON'S GUEST** 251 (T) Kieran Burke 6-11-4	J A Anderson (3)
2		**CINNODIN** F77 J Snowden 5-11-4	G Sheehan
3	214-34	**DE TEMPS EN TEMPS** 64 (BF) M Keighley 6-11-4	S Bowen
4	46	**FINAL STRAW** 44 N Henderson 5-11-4	D Wiliams (7)
5		**FULLFORWARD** F90 M Madgwick 5-11-4	M Goldstein
6	600-	**HARKSMAN** 135 M Keighley 5-11-4	J Best
7	45-6	**STRAIGHTNUPSOLDIER** 18 David Dennis 5-11-4	C J Todd
8	220-33	**TAMARIND BAY** 2 M Bowen 5-11-4	J Bowen
9	F4-4	**TURNDLIGHTSDOWNLOW** 106 M Keighley 5-11-4	A Wedge
10		**KING'S REIGN** F37 G & J Moore 4-11-1	C Quinn
11	06	**DYADORAS DESTINY** 65 M Young 4-10-8	D Noonan

Betting: 7-4 De Temps En Temps, 2-1 Tamarind Bay, 15-2 Cinnodin, 8-1 King's Reign, 10-1 Final Straw, 14-1 Chedington's Guest, 16-1 others

3.12 SOUTHERN CONTRACT LIFTING HANDICAP CHASE £3,248: 3M 2F (6)

1	0050-2	**LOUGH OWEL** 92 (T) D Summersby 7-12-0	B Carver
2	54P-25	**UNBLINKING** 44 (T) R Bevis 12-11-9	G Sheehan
3	P43-36	**BALLYNAHEER** 18 (P,T) David Dennis 6-11-9	J J Burke
4	23-611	**BLACKACRE** 8 (V,D) E Williams 6-11-5	A Wedge
5	11P/P0	**MOZZARO** 44 (P,D) M Keighley 10-11-4	J Best
6	6-0656	**MAWLOOD** 9 (B,T) Georgie Howell 9-10-2	Tabitha Worsley (3)

Betting: 4-6 Blackacre, 4-1 Lough Owel, 6-1 Unblinking, 8-1 Ballynaheer, 25-1 Mozzaro, 33-1 Mawlood

3.42 BET CLEVER BETGOODWIN HANDICAP HURDLE £4,066: 2M 3F (5)

1	/66-P0	**GOODWIN** 50 (P) C Gordon 7-12-2	F Gordon (3)
2	003051	**PAHLAVI** 13 (T) J J Hanlon (Ire) 8-12-0	P Hanlon (5)
3	/P520-	**SUN JOY** 212 (T) B Pauling 6-11-6	B R Jones
4	12105-	**BRAVE JEN** 181 (P,T) Cynthia Woods 7-11-5	J Andrews (3)
5	-21310	**STINGINHISSTEP** 17 (D) Mrs S Gardner 6-11-0	S Houlihan

Betting: 10-11 Pahlavi, 4-1 Stinginhisstep, 9-2 Sun Joy, 11-2 Goodwin, 20-1 Brave Jen

4.12 RJS WASTE MANAGEMENT UK HANDICAP CHASE £4,700: 2M 3F 104YDS (5)

1	-52100	**MIDNIGHT JEWEL** 7 (P,CD) C Longsdon 9-12-0	Lilly Pinchin
2	-22221	**LERMOOS LEGEND** 50 (P,T,D) M Bowen 10-11-11	S Bowen
3	3-24U0	**TRAPISTA** 17 J & A O'Neill 8-11-4	R McLernon
4	24PP-0	**ATREIDES** 18 (P,T) N Mulholland 7-10-11	C O'Farrell
5	2P5P/1	**BIG JIMBO** 9 (P,C) G & J Moore 8-10-5	F Mitchell (5)

Betting: 11-10 Lermoos Legend, 7-4 Big Jimbo, 8-1 Atreides, 10-1 Midnight Jewel, 12-1 Trapista

4.42 BETGOODWIN MARES' OPEN NH FLAT RACE £2,451: 2M 2F (8)

1	0	**JAX BELLE** 44 (P) L Wadham 11-2	T Cannon
2	04	**OPENING DANCE** 67 (T) E Lavelle 11-2	B R Jones
3	3P3-4	**TEDDINGTON LOCK** 127 (H) Sara Bradstock 11-2	Miss L Bradstock (7)
4	5	**BAILEYS BIG IMAGE** 125 M Young 11-0	C Hammond
5	0	**ELIOT GIRL** 44 J Tickle 11-0	T Fisher
6		**KELLEBELLE** D J Jeffreys 11-0	J King (3)
7	23	**LADY KARA** 11 (H) Dr R Newland & J Insole 11-0	L Scott (5)
8		**MIRROR OF ILLUSION** J Snowden 11-0	G Sheehan

Betting: 6-4 Lady Kara, 9-4 Opening Dance, 7-2 Mirror Of Illusion, 14-1 Kellebelle, 16-1 Teddington Lock, Jax Belle, 33-1 others

York

Going: good-good to soft in places **Racing TV**

Rob Wright's tips: 2.30 Secret History **3.00** Air Force One **3.30** Terrorise **4.00 Danger Bay** (nap) **4.30** Prince Of India **5.00 Wonderbolt** (nb) **5.30** Canvas

2.30 ENTER ITV7 FOR FREE 'CONFINED' EBF MAIDEN STAKES £12,885: 7F (9)

1	(6)		**A BOY NAMED MARY** N Tinkler 9-7	F McManoman
2	(3)	2	**CROWN OFFICE** 30 W Haggas 9-7	C Fallon
3	(8)	2	**DELINQUENT** 21 (BF) K R Burke 9-7	S James
4	(7)		**FOZZIE** K Ryan 9-7	T Eaves
5	(1)	5	**INFINITE DREAM** 30 A Balding 9-7	P J McDonald
6	(9)		**OCEAN OF STORMS** S & E Crisford 9-7	H Davies
7	(2)	2	**PROUD NATION** 47 (BF) R Fahey 9-7	Oisin Orr
8	(5)		**VALENDAY** K Ryan 9-7	K Stott
9	(4)	2	**SECRET HISTORY** 33 E Walker 9-2	K Shoemark

Betting: 5-2 Crown Office, 3-1 Delinquent, 7-2 Secret History, 7-1 Proud Nation, 10-1 Infinite Dream, 12-1 Valenday, Ocean Of Storms, 20-1 others

3.00 SKY BET SUPER SUB SPRINT HANDICAP £23,193: 5F (15)

1	(7)	111004	**ALZAHIR** 22 (T,D) J Candlish 5-9-12	G Wood
2	(8)	652010	**VINTAGE CLARETS** 18 (CD) R Fahey 6-9-10	E Tindall (7)
3	(9)	521430	**BERGERAC** 18 (P,CD) K Ryan 7-9-5	T Eaves
4	(12)	032140	**SQUEALER** 18 (CD) N Tinkler 5-9-4	R Scott
5	(13)	-12110	**DYONISOS** 38 (D) I Williams 3-9-4	B Loughnane
6	(11)	152102	**DAN TUCKER** 21 (BF,D) J O'Keeffe 3-9-0	W Fentiman (5)
7	(4)	20-013	**AIR FORCE ONE** 18 (V,CD) G Oldroyd 4-9-0	P J McDonald
8	(5)	504200	**VANTHEMAN** 18 (P,BF,D) K Ryan 4-8-13	K Stott
9	(1)	002000	**SILKY WILKIE** 127 (D) K R Burke 6-8-13	C Lee
10	(3)	050-34	**KING OF STARS** 22 (P,D) M Appleby 8-8-12	A Rawlinson
11	(2)	501110	**SPRING IS SPRUNG** 18 (D) P Midgley 6-8-12	J Hart
12	(6)	240310	**CURIOUS ROVER** 18 (D) K Scott 4-8-11	S Farmer (7)
13	(15)	144400	**ROUSING ENCORE** 9 (P,BF,C,D) R Carr 5-8-11	JP Sullivan
14	(14)	000616	**MANILA SCOUSE** 57 (T,D) T Easterby 6-8-9	D Allan
15	(10)	211345	**BLINKY** 79 (P,D) A Brittain 3-8-8	C Hardie

Betting: 7-2 Air Force One, 7-1 Dan Tucker, 8-1 Vantheman, 10-1 Vintage Clarets, Squealer, King Of Stars, Rousing Encore, Spring Is Sprung, Alzahir

3.30 SKYBET PROUD TO SUPPORT ROR STAYERS HANDICAP £15,462: 2M (10)

1	(4)	6-0660	**ENEMY** 15 (T) I Williams 8-10-2	B Loughnane
2	(6)	022310	**FIREBLADE** 18 (D) D Cunha 4-9-11	D Egan
3	(9)	4-5340	**SCOTTISH ANTHEM** 24 (T) Michael Keady 6-9-6	D Keenan
4	(7)	300322	**ARTISAN DANCER** 10 (BF,D) C Johnston 5-9-4	J Hart
5	(8)	5-5320	**RIBBLE VIBE** 17 D O'Meara 4-9-3	M Winn
6	(1)	201300	**GIBSIDE** 57 (CD) T Easterby 6-9-2	D Fentiman
7	(2)	-30524	**UMBRIA** 22 E Walker 4-9-1	K Shoemark
8	(10)	351310	**ROCK N ROLL PINKIE** 17 (CD) I Furtado 5-9-1	H Crouch
9	(5)	100043	**DIAMOND BAY** 15 (V,C,D) T Ward 7-9-1	J Crowley
10	(3)	40-510	**TERRORISE** 18 (P,CD) B Ellison 4-8-13	B Robinson

Betting: 3-1 Artisan Dancer, 11-2 Umbria, Terrorise, 6-1 Fireblade, 7-1 Diamond Bay, 8-1 Gibside, 10-1 Ribble Vibe, Rock N Roll Pinkie

4.00 SKY BET EXTRA PLACES MIDDLE DISTANCE HANDICAP £15,462: 1M 2F (12)

1	(11)	514405	**MAGNUM OPUS** 31 (V) S & E Crisford 4-10-2	H Burns (3)
2	(7)	11000-	**THEORY OF TIDES** 360 (P,D) J & T Gosden 4-9-12	R Havlin
3	(1)	11354/	**CONTACT** 916 (D) D & N Barron 7-9-12	W Pyle (3)
4	(6)	3-130	**TYCOON** 78 (P,D) K P De Foy 3-9-11	D Egan
5	(4)	-5611P	**DANTE'S LAD** 38 (T,CD) G Boughey 3-9-9	B Loughnane
6	(12)	2-311	**DANGER BAY** 26 E Bethell 3-9-9	C Rodriguez
7	(8)	000006	**DARK MOON RISING** 15 (P,C) K Ryan 6-9-5	J Callan (5)
8	(5)	523632	**PER CONTRA** 15 (P) T Easterby 4-9-5	D Allan
9	(2)	1-2310	**GUNSHIP** 80 (P,T,D) J Ferguson 3-9-4	D Muscutt
10	(10)	404426	**HORNSEA BAY** 31 (BF) D O'Meara 3-9-3	K Stott
11	(9)	-32215	**NOBLE HORIZON** 26 (D) W Haggas 3-9-2	C Fallon
12	(3)	-05405	**ZAIN BLUE** 15 (P,C) J Butler 4-9-2	W Fentiman (5)

Betting: 11-4 Danger Bay, 13-2 Gunship, 7-1 Per Contra, 8-1 Noble Horizon, Magnum Opus, Tycoon, Hornsea Bay, 12-1 Zain Blue

4.30 SKY BET STARMAN GARROWBY STAKES (LISTED) £39,697: 6F (11)

1	(8)	-35241	**LETHAL LEVI** 16 (B,D) K R Burke 6-9-7	C Lee
2	(2)	442102	**ELMONJED** 16 (P,T,CD) W Haggas 4-9-4	C Fallon
3	(7)	0-2000	**GRAND GREY** 57 (T) K Ryan 4-9-4	K Stott
4	(10)	650010	**ROYAL ZABEEL** 15 (D) M Appleby 4-9-4	D Muscutt
5	(6)	21-21	**ALMERAQ** 48 (D) W Haggas 3-9-2	J Crowley
6	(3)	2-1510	**CRESTOFDISTINCTION** 59 (P,D) J Channon 3-9-2	C Rodriguez
7	(9)	104005	**PELLITORY** 16 (V) James Owen 3-9-2	P Cosgrave
8	(1)	121211	**PRINCE OF INDIA** 29 (T,D) M Botti 3-9-2	D Egan
9	(4)	36-100	**TIGER BAY** 58 (D) H Candy 5-9-2	T Whelan
10	(11)	210-15	**KASSAYA** 35 A Balding 3-8-11	P J McDonald
11	(5)	610015	**STORMY IMPACT** 21 (D) R Fahey 3-8-11	S Gray

Betting: 15-8 Almeraq, 7-2 Prince Of India, 6-1 Lethal Levi, 15-2 Kassaya, 8-1 Elmonjed, 16-1 Grand Grey, Tiger Bay, 20-1 others

5.00 SKY BET BUILD A BET FILLIES' HANDICAP £15,462: 1M 1F (11)

1	(1)	314201	**ZAPPHIRE** 24 (P) J Camacho 5-10-0	T Kiely-Marshall (5)

LEAGUE TWO

A contentious stoppage-time penalty denied Bromley top spot as leaders Gillingham came from two down to draw 2-2 and extend their unbeaten league run to 19 games (Peter Wilson writes).

The Gillingham substitute Garath McCleary initiated a penalty by crashing into the home goalkeeper, Grant Smith, allowing Max Clark to score from the spot. Swindon Town had briefly held top spot after a fifth victory in six league games, winning 3-1 at Barrow.

Bristol Rovers won a third successive league match for the first time since October 2022 but had to hold off a late fightback from Newport County. The visitors won 3-2, after being 3-0 ahead, as the hosts lost a sixth straight game.

Milton Keynes Dons, who had Jon Mellish sent off, also battled back from three down but lost 3-2 at home to Grimsby Town.

Tranmere Rovers had 44-year-old Joe Murphy, inset, in goal in their 3-1 away defeat by Salford City.

Isaac Hutchinson, who joined Cheltenham Town on loan from Bristol Rovers last week, took only two minutes to receive the cheers of his new side's supporters when he scored with a curling free kick, as Cheltenham won their first league game this season 1-0 against Accrington Stanley. Shrewsbury Town, 3-1 away to Barnet, and Crawley Town, 1-0 away to Harrogate Town, also got their first league wins.

As did Oldham Athletic, where Michael Mellon, the son of the Oldham manager, Micky, scored on his debut after joining on loan, in the 1-0 away win at Cambridge United.

BARNET 1 Shelton 14
SHREWSBURY 3 Collinge 15 (og), Ihionvien 25, Clucas 42
HT: 1-3

BARROW 1 Shipley 80
SWINDON 3 Drinan 2, Glatzel 36, Ehibhatiomhan 77
HT: 0-2 **Att**: 3,077

BROMLEY 2 Kabamba 7, Cheek 12
GILLINGHAM 2 Andrews 56, Clark 90+8 (pen)
HT: 2-0 **Att**: 3,005

CAMBRIDGE UTD 0
OLDHAM 1 Mellon 21
HT: 0-1

CHELTENHAM 1 Hutchinson 2
ACCRINGTON 0
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 3,284

COLCHESTER 1 Lisbie 66
CREWE 1 March 39
HT: 0-1 **Att**: 4,572

HARROGATE 0
CRAWLEY 1 Brown 42
HT: 0-1 **Att**: 2,757
Sent off: Loft (Crawley) 90+1

MK DONS 2 McEachran 47 (og), Lemonheigh-Evans 90+1
GRIMSBY 3 Green 9, Kabia 23, Vernam 29
HT: 0-3 **Att**: 7,758
Sent off: Mellish (MK Dons) 36

NEWPORT CO 2 Whitmore 78, Opoku 89
BRISTOL ROVERS 3 Thomas 52, 59, Harrison 72
HT: 0-0 **Att**: 5,305

NOTTS CO 1 Dennis 46
FLEETWOOD 0
HT: 0-0 **Att**: 9,068

SALFORD 3 Garbutt 56 (pen), Stockton 81, Ashley 86
TRANMERE 1 Patrick 64
HT: 0-0 **Att**: 3,628

WALSALL 1 Kanu 43
CHESTERFIELD 0
HT: 1-0 **Att**: 6,695
Sent off: Lakin (Walsall) 66

		P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	Pts
1	**Gillingham**	7	4	3	0	11	5	6	**15**
2	**Swindon**	7	5	0	2	14	9	5	**15**
3	**Walsall**	7	5	0	2	7	4	3	**15**
4	**Grimsby**	7	4	2	1	13	8	5	**14**
5	**Bromley**	7	3	4	0	12	7	5	**13**
6	**Crewe**	7	4	1	2	11	7	4	**13**
7	**Chesterfield**	7	4	1	2	11	9	2	**13**
8	**Salford**	7	4	1	2	10	8	2	**13**
9	**MK Dons**	7	3	2	2	12	6	6	**11**
10	**Notts Co**	7	3	2	2	12	9	3	**11**
11	**Fleetwood**	7	3	2	2	9	9	0	**11**
12	**Cambridge Utd**	7	3	1	3	8	7	1	**10**
13	**Bristol Rovers**	7	3	1	3	7	8	-1	**10**
14	**Tranmere**	6	2	2	2	10	7	3	**8**
15	**Harrogate**	7	2	2	3	7	9	-2	**8**
16	**Colchester**	7	1	4	2	7	8	-1	**7**
17	**Oldham**	7	1	4	2	4	5	-1	**7**
18	**Barnet**	7	2	1	4	6	10	-4	**7**
19	**Barrow**	7	2	0	5	5	9	-4	**6**
20	**Crawley**	7	1	2	4	5	11	-6	**5**
21	**Shrewsbury**	7	1	2	4	5	13	-8	**5**
22	**Newport Co**	7	1	1	5	7	12	-5	**4**
23	**Cheltenham**	7	1	1	5	3	12	-9	**4**
24	**Accrington**	6	0	3	3	3	7	-4	**3**

NEXT FIXTURES

Saturday (3.0 unless stated): Accrington v Colchester (12.30); Bristol Rovers v Barrow; Chesterfield v MK Dons; Crawley v Cheltenham (12.30); Crewe v Barnet; Fleetwood v Walsall; Gillingham v Notts Co; Grimsby v Cambridge Utd; Oldham v Bromley; Shrewsbury v Salford; Swindon v Harrogate; Tranmere v Newport Co.

EAT.DRINK.LOVE

HEATHER KNIGHT

England cricketer on the dangers of free drinks vouchers, and Indian wine

EAT

MY FAVOURITE MEAL

For me, it's more the experience of going out to a country pub for a Sunday roast with friends, family and a nice glass of Barossa Shiraz. No starter, I just go straight into it, but the meat in the roast is medium-rare beef. For dessert, it's apple crumble with warm custard and cold ice cream.

MY FAVOURITE RESTAURANT

Osteria Ovada, an authentic little Italian just off the Finchley Road where I meet my friend Isa Guha. The food is just glorious, but there's no menu: the owner Paolo just brings out what he's made.

MY DREAM DINNER PARTY

Freddie Mercury: I adore Queen. He'd have some amazing stories and he'd be a big character. Ruth Bader Ginsburg: the Supreme Court judge. A remarkable lady who did so much for women's rights. Dawn French: to bring the comedy. I loved *The Vicar Of Dibley*. Thierry Henry: I'm a big Arsenal fan who grew up watching The Invincibles and he was my favourite. He'd bring sophistication. Monica Galetti: I'm not cooking, so I've thought of a great female cook from *MasterChef* who is so stern and so full of dry humour.

I travelled a lot with my dad. He had ten CDs and played them on a loop

Mercury would have a few stories to tell at dinner

DRINK

MY FAVOURITE TIPPLE

Alcoholic: red wine. Unfortunately, I don't drink enough to be a connoisseur, which is a non-perk of having an athletics job. I've tried Indian wine, though: Sula, not great, but not awful. Non-alcoholic: a flat white from a nice artisan coffee shop.

MY WORST HANGOVER

After the Taste Of Tasmania Festival, one New Year's Eve in Hobart, when I was in my early twenties. We had free drinks vouchers. I was in bed all next day. Getting up and exercising is the best way to get over a hangover, but you need other areas of mental strength. I didn't have any.

LOVE

MY FAVOURITE FILM

Bridget Jones's Diary. She's very relatable, whether on the wagon or firmly off it. I believe there's not much of her in me…

MY FAVOURITE TELEVISION SERIES

Gavin and Stacey. I studied biomedical science at Cardiff University and lived in a flat with some Welsh people who introduced me to it. I'm familiar with Barry Island and I loved the ending: everything wrapped up and nobody died.

MY FAVOURITE ALBUM

Urban Hymns by the Verve. I grew up in Plymouth, so I travelled a lot for cricket with my dad. He had ten CDs, played them on a loop. *Urban Hymns* was one and my love of indie rock began there.

MY FAVOURITE BOOK

Sapiens: A Brief History Of Humankind by Yuval Noah Harari. The main thing that stuck with me is that since everything is human-made, the reason we progressed is because we believe in common things, such as money and law.

MY GUILTY PLEASURE

Gardening. My garden is manageable and medium-sized. I've been painting the decking and trying to sort out the rose bushes. Two problems: I'm awful and my partner, Tim, forgets to water the plants.

John Aizlewood

- *Catch Heather and England Women as they kick-start their ICC Cricket World Cup campaign against South Africa on October 3.*

2	(5) 122-06	**LAURA BAY** 48 D Menuisier 4-9-11	K Shoemark
3	(6) 21-315	**ORANGE SKY** 57 G Boughey 3-9-10	B Loughnane
4	(7)0-0534	**ROYALTY BAY** 29 (C) S Spencer 3-9-10	D Swift
5	(3)1-6005	**RHAPSODY** 18 W Haggas 3-9-6	J Hart
6	(9) 3411	**SEREN STAR** 16 (D) W Haggas 3-9-6	C Fallon
7	(4) 02-11	**REVELANCE** 38 (D) R Beckett 3-9-6	H Crouch
8	(8)325425	**EPIDAVROS** 5 (D) K Scott 4-9-3	S Farmer (7)
9	(11)364131	**FOLKENE** 15 Roger Fell 3-9-2	Joanna Mason
10	(10) 13040	**STATEIRA** 56 A Balding 3-9-1	P J McDonald
11	(2) 60611	**WONDERBOLT** 22 K R Burke 3-9-0	S James

Betting: 5-2 Revelance, 4-1 Seren Star, 13-2 Wonderbolt, 8-1 Zapphire, Folkene, 10-1 Rhapsody, 12-1 Orange Sky, 14-1 Epidavros

5.30 SKY BET, FOR THE FANS MILE APPRENTICE HANDICAP
£12,885: 1M (17)

1	(9)040100	**OBELIX** 22 (H,C,D) J Camacho 5-10-3	T Kiely-Marshall
2	(1)-14004	**ZRYAN** 29 (D) D O'Meara 4-10-2	C J Whiteley (7)
3	(4)-05313	**BILLYB** 29 (P,CD) Craig Lidster 6-10-2	Ashley Lewis (3)
4	(5)225522	**BARLEY** 13 (P,D) T Easterby 6-10-0	J Dickson (7)
5	(8)6060-4	**RAJAPOUR** 111 (D) D O'Meara 5-9-13	C Horgan
6	(3)010030	**FEEL THE NEED** 31 (C,D) M Herrington 5-9-9	A Pinna (5)
7	(12)465321	**EARTHWATCH** 39 (D) W Haggas 3-9-7	W Fentiman
8	(6) 101321	**DOUBLE PARKED** 15 (D) T Easterby 3-9-7	A Young
9	(7) 5-2105	**BOWEN ISLAND** 82 (BF) K Ryan 3-9-7	J Callan (3)
10	(16)224102	**COMMANDER OF LIFE** 22 Jessica Macey 4-9-6	M Paetel (3)
11	(2)141250	**CANVAS** 29 (D) S Dixon 3-9-6	S Feilden (3)
12	(11)002056	**TROPEZ POWER** 65 (BF,D) M Walford 6-9-5	Olivia Tubb (3)
13	(15)000554	**THEME PARK** 15 (CD) N Tinkler 5-9-5	E Tindall (5)
14	(14)500220	**LIR SPECIALE** 17 B Ellison 6-9-4	S Farmer (3)
15	(17)250523	**HALE END** 15 (P,D) M Dods 5-9-3	R Elliott
16	(10)020022	**HARSWELL RUBY** 15 (D) Roger Fell 3-8-11	J Nicholls (3)
17	(13)-26340	**ONEMORENOMORE** 14 P McBride 5-8-11	Morgan Cole

Betting: 7-2 Earthwatch, 7-1 Barley, 8-1 Double Parked, Commander Of Life, Billyb, 14-1 Theme Park, Feel The Need, Hale End

Cricket scoreboards

Vitality Blast quarter-finals
Lancashire Lightning v Kent Spitfires

Old Trafford (Kent Spitfires won toss): *Lancashire Lightning beat Kent Spitfires by three wickets*

Kent Spitfires		(balls)
T S Muyeye c Livingstone b Wood	0	(1)
D J Bell-Drummond c Blatherwick b Anderson	19	(13)
Z Crawley c Salt b Blatherwick	27	(18)
J L Denly c Wells b Hartley	28	(20)
*†S W Billings c Wells b Livingstone	2	(3)
J D M Evison c Wood b Livingstone	27	(24)
J A Leaning b Aspinwall	10	(14)
G Stewart b Aspinwall	25	(15)
F J Klaassen c Blatherwick b Wood	6	(7)
M W Parkinson not out	2	(3)
N N Gilchrist c Blatherwick b Wood	1	(3)
Extras (b 1, lb 2, w 1, nb 2)	6	
Total (20 overs)	**153**	

Fall of wickets 1-0, 2-33, 3-65, 4-71, 5-81, 6-115, 7-128, 8-145, 9-149. **Bowling** Wood 4-0-29-3; Anderson 4-0-38-1; Blatherwick 1-0-16-1; Hartley 4-0-21-1; Livingstone 4-0-21-2; Wells 1-0-13-0; Aspinwall 2-0-12-2.

Lancashire Lightning		(balls)
†P D Salt c Gilchrist b Stewart	3	(4)
*K K Jennings c Parkinson b Klaassen	4	(7)
L W P Wells b Klaassen	1	(5)
L S Livingstone not out	85	(45)
A J Turner c Gilchrist b Evison	22	(14)
M A Jones c Klaassen b Parkinson	28	(17)
T W Hartley c Leaning b Parkinson	0	(3)
J M Blatherwick b Klaassen	11	(13)
L Wood not out	1	(3)
Extras (lb 1)	1	
Total (7 wkts, 18.3 overs)	**156**	

J M Anderson and T H Aspinwall did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-4, 2-5, 3-31, 4-84, 5-118, 6-118, 7-144. **Bowling** Stewart 2-0-12-1; Klaassen 4-0-14-3; Gilchrist 2.3-0-37-0; Denly 2-0-25-0; Parkinson 4-0-46-2; Evison 4-0-21-1.

Somerset v Birmingham Bears

Taunton (Birmingham Bears won toss): *Somerset beat Birmingham Bears by four wickets*

Birmingham Bears		(balls)
*†A L Davies b Green	71	(39)
R M Yates c Smeed b Overton	25	(10)
D R Mousley b Gregory	12	(6)
S R Hain c Dickson b Meredith	21	(18)
E G Barnard c Overton b Green	15	(13)
K Smith not out	28	(22)
G H S Garton c Gregory b Ball	2	(5)
D R Briggs not out	11	(7)
Extras (lb 4, w 1)	5	
Total (6 wkts, 20 overs)	**190**	

J B Lintott, R J Gleeson and O J Hannon-Dalby did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-39, 2-91, 3-127, 4-133, 5-155, 6-159. **Bowling** Overton 3-0-35-1; Meredith 3-0-41-1; Ball 4-0-37-1; Gregory 3-0-18-1; Goldsworthy 3-0-25-0; Green 4-0-30-2.

Somerset		(balls)
W C F Smeed c Lintott b Gleeson	9	(12)
T Kohler-Cadmore c Mousley b Hannon-Dalby	32	(26)
T B Abell c Yates b Briggs	51	(31)
†J E K Rew c Barnard b Garton	11	(13)
S R Dickson not out	71	(26)
*L Gregory c Mousley b Hannon-Dalby	9	(8)
B G F Green c Mousley b Hannon-Dalby	1	(2)
C Overton not out	1	(1)
Extras (lb 4, w 2)	6	
Total (6 wkts, 19.5 overs)	**191**	

L P Goldsworthy, J T Ball and R P Meredith did not bat.
Fall of wickets 1-28, 2-64, 3-80, 4-134, 5-156, 6-158. **Bowling** Garton 4-0-45-1; Hannon-Dalby 4-0-24-3; Gleeson 4-0-33-1; Barnard 2.5-0-40-0; Briggs 4-0-32-1; Lintott 1-0-13-0.

Livingstone steers side to Finals Day

T20 Blast: Quarter-final

Paul Edwards

There were many Septembers in the second half of the 20th century when limited-overs cricket came to the rescue of Lancashire's season. Whatever agonies the championship had brought, a knockout final could be relied upon to soothe the pain. Perhaps it will be that way again this year.

For, after reaching their 18th quarter-final in the 23 editions of the Blast, Lancashire will take part in their tenth Finals Day on Saturday after beating Kent by three wickets.

Needing 154 to win on a tricky pitch, the home side reached their target with nine balls to spare, thanks largely to Liam Livingstone, whose unbeaten 85 off 45 balls included seven sixes.

Kent had scored 80 off their first ten overs, which was respectable enough. The problem was that they lost half their side in doing so and a wicket fell whenever the visiting team seemed to be getting on top. They could add only 73 runs during the second half of their innings and their total of 153 never looked enough.

By contrast, Keaton Jennings's attack went about their business in disciplined fashion and their fielding was almost faultless. Having dismissed Tawanda Muyeye, caught at mid-off by Livingstone, with the first ball, Luke Wood took two more wickets in his final over but six bowlers had success. After Lancashire lost three wickets in the powerplay, Livingstone and Ashton Turner grabbed the initiative. They put on 53 in less than five overs and the loss of four further wickets barely mattered while one of England's cleanest hitters was in charge.

David Walsh

CHIEF SPORTS WRITER

Doping testers should have spotted Armstrong's cancer — new star has been luckier

LINDA ARMSTRONG KELLY/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES

A doping test detected that Traeen, below, had cancer but the UCI failed to pick up that Armstrong, above, had a tumour

Ten days ago the Norwegian cyclist Torstein Traeen earned the leader's Red Jersey in La Vuelta. On the face of it, another leg of another grand tour with another rider leading the race. The 30-year-old is a decent climber, better than the rank and file but not quite elite level. He had four days in red and, a week on from that, he's hanging in, just outside the top ten.

What made Traeen's story different was the positive drug test he'd recorded in 2022. He'd ridden the Volta a Catalunya in March of that year, then got the bad news in May. The date is one he would remember: Friday the 13th. That morning at breakfast, he and his Uno-X Pro Cycling team-mates had been joking about something bad happening.

Then Dr Knut Ronning, who worked with the team, called. The rider had returned a positive test for human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG). Not every professional athlete knows what hCG is, let alone appreciates that it is a proscribed substance. Traeen couldn't explain how he'd tested positive; he insisted he hadn't taken anything. Ronning thought he knew why, but didn't mention it.

Instead he suggested the rider see a doctor and undergo certain checks. HCG is a hormone produced by pregnant women and by men with testicular cancer. It is also a hormone that has been taken by athletes in its synthetic form to increase their testosterone. Ronning thought Traeen was sick, not a cheat.

It transpired the rider had testicular cancer. That was the bad news. The good news was that, because of the anti-doping test, it had been detected early.

Five months after the positive test, three months after receiving the diagnosis, Traeen returned to competition. Early detection made everything straightforward. An operation to remove one testicle, follow-up tests that showed he didn't need chemotherapy, and soon he was good to go. Three years on he is delivering the best performance of his career in Spain.

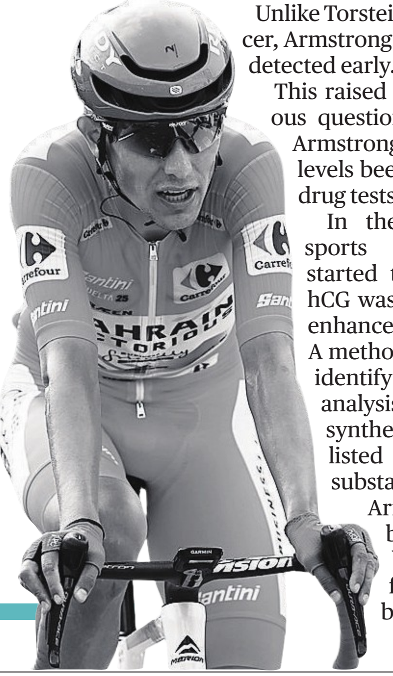
Traeen's case recalled another athlete who survived testicular cancer and an important story that, for the most part, went under the radar. Twenty-nine years ago a 24-year-old Lance Armstrong was in his fourth full season. This was 1996 and his best to this point. He'd won Flèche Wallonne in April and the Tour DuPont in May.

At the same time he'd noticed that his right testicle was swollen, but dismissed that as an occupational hazard. Too much time spent on the saddle. He was also sleeping a lot and feeling unusually tired. His nipples felt sensitive. All of this he pretty much ignored. The time-honoured macho response: if you can't deal with the pain, you can't stay in the game.

At the Atlanta Olympics that summer he competed in the individual time-trial and the road race, finishing sixth and 12th. By then he knew something wasn't right. Still, he carried on, having 15 more race days before the end of the season. On September 18 he celebrated his 25th birthday at his home in Austin, Texas. Two days later he organised a party for friends, but a severe headache ruined his evening.

The next day the headache was still there and now his vision was blurred. Then, on a phone call with his agent, Bill Stapleton, he began coughing. In the bathroom he coughed up blood and soon he had testicular cancer diagnosed. His was the worst kind, stage IV. According to oncologists who treated him, he had no more than a 50 per cent chance of surviving.

> “They knew Armstrong would be well within his rights to sue them



Unlike Torstein Traeen's cancer, Armstrong's had not been detected early.

This raised one very obvious question: why hadn't Armstrong's raised hCG levels been picked up in drug tests?

In the early 1980s sports authorities started to realise that hCG was being used to enhance performance. A method was found to identify it in urine analysis in 1987 and synthetic hCG was listed as a banned substance in 1988. Armstrong believes he'd been unwell for months before his diagnosis. He would have undergone multiple tests in 1996.

Working for L'Équipe at the time, the French journalist Pierre Ballester spoke to Jacques de Ceaurriz, head of France's national anti-doping laboratory, who did a lot of work for the UCI, world cycling's governing body. De Ceaurriz knew about the failure to detect Armstrong's cancer. “I know that beta-hCG was on the list of products to be looked for at the time,” he told Ballester. But there is a difference between a declaration of intent and the facts.

“For an analysis to be valid, two things need to happen. First, the product is analysed in the laboratory. Second, the conclusions are included in a report. At the time, the second point was not carried out. The information could not have been reported. Moreover, the ‘institution’ knew full well that it was overlooked. This case caused profound embarrassment.”

Ballester wrote that “embarrassment” was a euphemism for panic. The authorities knew that Armstrong would be well within his rights to sue them for negligence. In an interview with a Le Monde journalist in January 1997, four months after his diagnosis, Armstrong was calm when told that his cancer could have been detected much earlier.

“I knew that hCG was looked for in antidumping controls,” he said. “I would like to know what my level was at the time of the control in the Swiss Grand Prix,” he said, referencing a test he'd done four weeks before he'd coughed up blood. “If it's true that the UCI keeps all the results, it should be possible to know where my cancer was at that time.”

There is no record of Armstrong following up on that, nor did the UCI ever explain how the rider's elevated levels of hCG went undetected.

Armstrong returned to competition in 1998 and won the Tour de France in 1999. After the first stage of the 1999 Tour, Armstrong's post-race urine sample showed he had used the banned corticosteroid triamcinolone acetonide. This is a substance that can be taken under a therapeutic use exemption (TUE), but in the column marked “medications taken”, Armstrong wrote “none”. There was no TUE.

Rather, it was a clear anti-doping violation, but the UCI chose to accept a backdated medical prescription from the US Postal team that, they said, showed the corticosteroid was for the treatment of Armstrong's saddle sore. When Armstrong confessed to his doping in 2013, he admitted the UCI had covered up that positive test at the 1999 Tour.

Why would the governing body have done that?

In a 2012 sworn affidavit to the United States Anti-Doping Agency, Armstrong's one-time team-mate Jonathan Vaughters offered this clue: “Early on at a Postal Service training camp I had a conversation with Lance in which he told me that the UCI should have detected a high level of hCG in his doping controls when he had cancer but had failed to do so. Thus, in Lance's eyes, the UCI was somewhat at fault for the extent of his cancer. In any case, Lance said, ‘If I ever have a doping problem, I have this card to play.’ ”

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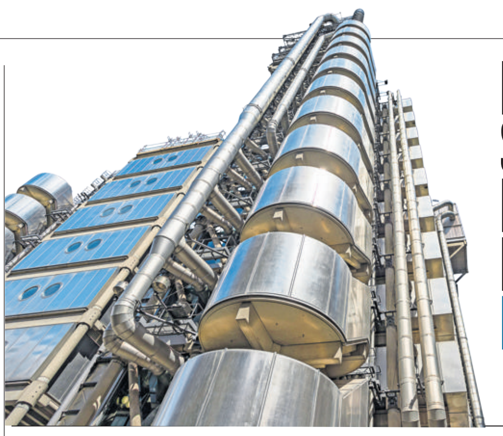
BUSINESS &MONEY

'I'M HELPING SOLVE THE HOUSING CRISIS'
INTERVIEW PAGE 5



BEHIND THE SCENES AT LLOYD'S OF LONDON
PAGE 6

HOW TO BE A SUPER SAVER
MONEY PAGE 11

EY back at British Steel after China 'sabotage'

Oliver Gill

The accountancy firm that sold British Steel to a Chinese company that was later accused of "sabotaging" the UK's sovereign steelmaking capability is back running the manufacturer on behalf of the government.

EY has been hired to oversee the operations of British Steel after the government seized operational control from Jingye, its Chinese parent.

Jingye bought British Steel out of bankruptcy protection in March 2020. The transaction was signed off by the government's Official Receiver in conjunction with "special manager" EY.

The revelation comes with the future of British Steel at a crossroads. Jonathan Reynolds, the government's business secretary until last week's cabinet reshuffle, had been due to travel to China this week for discussions with business leaders. Although it was unclear whether this included direct negotiations with Jingye, British Steel was expected to feature high on the agenda.

The government took operational control of British Steel in April after Jingye stopped ordering vital materials for the blast furnaces at its works in Scunthorpe. This sparked claims that it had sought to "sabotage" Britain's last remaining blast furnaces and leave the country as the only one in the G7 with no virgin steelmaking capability.

Government officials were this weekend tight-lipped on whether Peter Kyle, who has replaced Reynolds, would go to China this week or not.

Jingye remains the owner of British Steel even though it has no operational control of its works. The Chinese firm has now formally submitted a demand of more than £1 billion to the UK government in return for allowing British Steel to be fully nationalised, it can be revealed.

Meanwhile, government officials are stepping up plans to take full financial control. One option being pushed by senior officials would be to merge the operations of British Steel with those of Sheffield Forgemasters, already in state control, and Speciality Steels UK, part of the Liberty Steel metals empire of controversial tycoon Sanjeev Gupta.

The Official Receiver stepped in to take control of Speciality Steels after Gupta failed in his attempt last month to keep the business out of bankruptcy.

Reports last week suggested the government was in favour of merging all of Britain's steel companies, but industry sources played this down as a viable option.

British Steel collapsed into insolvency in May 2019 when its private equity owner, Greybull Capital, failed to secure additional funding. The following spring, Jingye pledged to invest £1.2 billion to modernise British Steel.

The business department did not comment.

EY declined to comment.

Water threat to Universal park

William Turvill

Universal Studios' plans to build Europe's biggest theme park in Bedfordshire could be scuppered by Britain's antiquated water system.

The US entertainment giant will have to overcome a plethora of issues to complete its project, and is even facing local demands to limit fast-food sales and share car park revenues from the site.

The park, which is expected to create 28,000 jobs and pump £50 billion into the UK economy, could increase Bedford's daily demand for water by up to 50 per cent after its scheduled opening in 2031.

However, Anglian Water, the local utility operator, may struggle to meet this demand in time. It needs to upgrade its water and waste infrastructure, including possibly doubling the size of Bedford's sewage treatment works. But it fears that the UK's "broken regulatory model" will hold it back.

Local authorities in Bedfordshire have also raised concerns about traffic. They estimate that Universal could make up to £73,185 a day, or £27 million a year, from car parking charges and want it to contribute 10 per cent of this to fund local transport infrastructure.

Central Bedfordshire council, which is broadly supportive of the development plans, has made a series of recommendations, including a call for the park not to advertise fast food.

The council also fears that a wave of "Airbnb-style holiday let accommodation" will drive up rental prices. It has suggested that the park owner should help local authorities to develop affordable housing.

Its submission to the government's planning consultation also questioned why the developer has indicated that it will conduct local surveys on bats, birds, badgers and otters, but not water voles.

The council's submission further noted that Universal's park would be built in an area prone to flooding, and that infrastructure upgrades would be needed from Anglian for "foul drainage".

It said Anglian had "confirmed that foul sewer capacity is not currently available for the development in its entirety" and that upgrade schedules "may not

Continued on page 2➔

Jaguar cyber hack will take 'weeks to fix'

- Suppliers send thousands home
- Carmaker calls in ex-GCHQ exec

Oliver Gill

Tens of thousands of automotive workers are to be temporarily laid off for several weeks as Jaguar Land Rover and its suppliers grapple with the fallout from a catastrophic cyberattack.

Bosses are this weekend scrambling to get to the bottom of a hack that has not only paralysed Britain's biggest carmaker, but is sending shock waves through the wider supply chain.

JLR staff have already been told not to report for work until Tuesday. However, The Sunday Times can reveal that the cyber breach will take weeks to resolve – and that a restart of factories on Tuesday is unlikely.

"We said don't come into work on Friday and Monday. That does not mean come to work on Tuesday," a source said. Bringing the systems back online will take "a matter of weeks, rather than days". And there will be a "long tail of work that will take even longer", they added.

The impact on JLR, which employs 33,000 people in the UK, is likely to be just the tip of the iceberg, however.

"Many, many thousands" more workers in the supply chain will be asked to stay at home until the JLR works are back up and running, automotive industry leaders warn this weekend.

Car dealers are scrambling to build workarounds that will allow them to restart servicing and get access to spare parts. Sales can take place, but it is hard to register the vehicles and give a precise time frame on delivery.

It is estimated that JLR's worldwide shutdown is costing it £72 million a day in lost sales. A spokeswoman for the company said on Saturday: "We continue to work around the clock to restart our global applications in a controlled and safe manner following the recent cyber incident. We are working with third-party cybersecurity specialists and alongside law enforcement.

"We want to thank all our customers, partners, suppliers and colleagues for their patience and support. We are very sorry for the disruption this incident has caused.

"Our retail partners remain open and we will continue to provide further updates."

JLR was hit by the cyberattack last Sunday, paralysing its global operations and systems.

Responsibility has been claimed by a group called "Scattered Lapsus$ Hunters", an organisation with links to the group behind the recent hacks of Marks & Spencer, Harrods and the Co-op.

JLR has drafted in a former GCHQ executive Nicola Hudson, now a partner at City PR firm Brunswick, to advise on its handling of the situation. "This will go back down the whole supply chain," said one senior industry executive.

Peter Kyle, the new business secretary, is now under pressure to step in and provide funding to suppliers to limit the contagion across Britain's automotive sector.

The UK has previously given funding to carmakers and their supply chains following the disruption to production across Nissan and Honda works in 2011 in the wake of an earthquake in Japan.

The government declined to comment.

Jaguar tamed, pages 2-3

BRITISH BIKE FIRM GOES UP A GEAR

Maeving targets commuters and female customers. Its Coventry plant can make 11,000 bikes a year

A Coventry-based electric motorbike manufacturer targeting commuters and female customers has raised £8 million from investors to increase production, drive overseas sales and develop new models, *writes Hannah Prevett*.

Maeving, founded by university friends Seb Inglis-Jones and Will Stirrup in 2018, secured the cash from venture capital firms, including Venrex, Future Planet Capital and Elbow Beach Capital, and angel investors such as John Ayton, co-founder of the jewellery brand Links of London, and Simon Hill-Norton, co-founder of the athleisure brand Sweaty Betty. It also secured a £3 million working capital facility from HSBC UK.

Inglis-Jones said the money will be spent on research and development and on boosting its marketing budgets, particularly for international audiences. Maeving exports half its bikes to countries including France and Germany, with America being its largest international market outside the UK. Inglis-Jones said sales to the US were up fivefold this year compared with 2024, despite Donald Trump's tariff trade war.

"The biggest challenge for all manufacturers exporting to the US has been the uncertainty … If people are uncertain about their finances, they're less likely to spend money on a discretionary product," he said.

The co-founders were inspired after seeing sales in China soar for electric bikes. Where Chinese models cost as little as a few hundred pounds, Maeving bikes start at £4,995.

M&S urges 'rethink' on family farm tax

Oliver Gill

Marks & Spencer is urging ministers to rethink proposed changes to inheritance tax relief for farmers.

Bosses at the FTSE 100 retailer want Emma Reynolds, the new environment secretary, to back Britain's farmers after a backlash from rural communities.

"We support our farmers' calls on the government to do more to support farming and that includes supporting their call for a rethink on inheritance tax," Alex Freudmann, managing director of M&S Food, said.

M&S has previously supported pleas by the National Farmers' Union to extend a consultation into proposed reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief.

The tougher language comes as a signal of intent that M&S is prepared to fight Sir Keir Starmer's administration on the proposals.

The government insisted it was "working with farmers to build a more profitable farming system with food production at its core and that helps restore nature in an uncertain world".

This weekend's invention follows a period of silence from Reynolds' predecessor, Steve Reed. M&S wrote to Reed on June 19 after taking soundings from key farmers and growers to warn him of "doubt … that there was a genuine national commitment to increasing the domestic supply of food".

Freudmann's letter read: "A clear and concrete target to increase the proportion of indigenous foods eaten in the UK that are grown in the UK would galvanise cross-government action. If it was set down in law, like targets around net zero … it could also tilt the balance towards farmers and growers in decisions around planning or access to water. I hope to see a clear … commitment to domestic food production."

Reed did not respond, sources said. Reynolds visited a pig farm yesterday.

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DANGEROUS LIAISONS

Nestlé boss Laurent Freixe has paid the price for love, but he's not the first — many others have also been shot off their high perch by Cupid's arrow

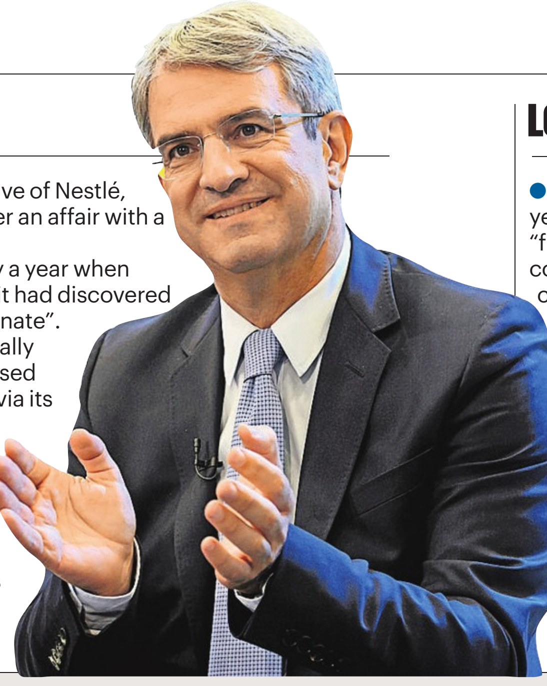
A BITTER END AT NESTLÉ

● **Laurent Freixe** was sacked as chief executive of Nestlé, the world's biggest food group, last week after an affair with a junior colleague.

The 63-year-old had been the boss for only a year when Nestlé announced he would be leaving after it had discovered "a romantic relationship with a direct subordinate".

A twice-married Frenchman, he had originally denied the affair to the board of the Swiss-based company, which was alerted to the situation via its internal whistleblowing hotline. After further investigation, he was dismissed following a 40-year career at the company.

He is not the first chief executive to be forced out as a result of a relationship deemed to be inappropriate by a company's board. As these examples show, it's a story as old as time.



LOONEY'S £32M MISTAKE

● **Bernard Looney** resigned as the chief executive of BP two years ago this month after he admitted that he had not been "fully transparent" with the board of the FTSE 100 energy company about his previous personal relationships with colleagues.

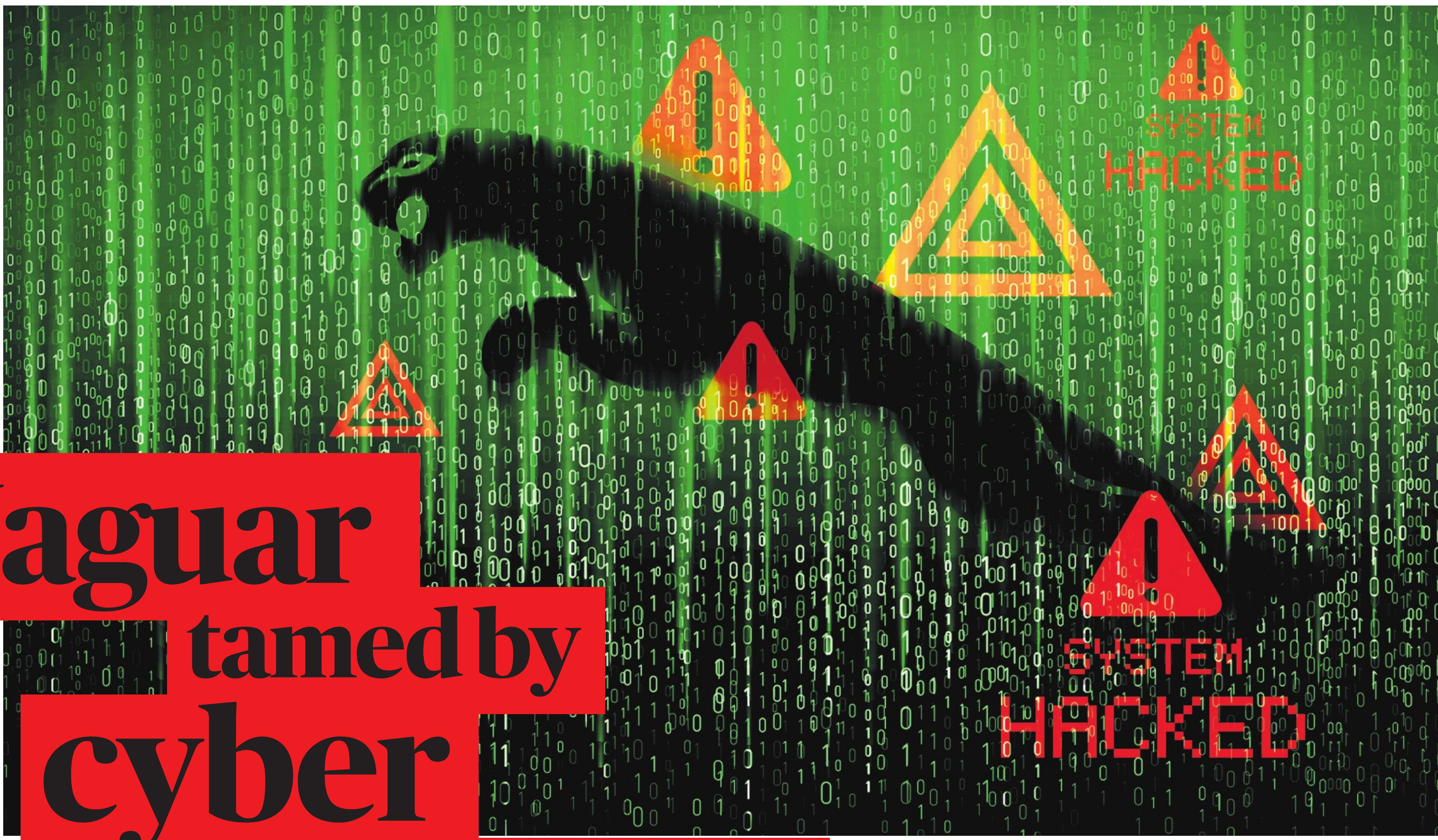
But in December 2023, he was formally dismissed after the board concluded that he had "knowingly misled" them when asked about his relationships in July 2022.

The Irishman had joined BP as a 21-year-old in 1991, and had led the company's attempts to go green. Much of that net-zero push has been reversed by his successor, Murray Auchincloss, another insider who had previously disclosed a relationship with a BP colleague, with whom he has a child.

Looney, who grew up on a dairy farm in Ireland, had been chief executive for four years when he left and was denied bonuses worth £32 million.

Jaguar tamed by cyber criminals

A cyberattack has piled more misery on the car giant. Now its suppliers are sending staff home as production stalls. By *Oliver Gill*



Mandarins in the Department for Business and Trade's automotive sector team were in Coventry on Tuesday. There they met David Roberts, chairman of Evtec, which employs 1,150 people and specialises in making aluminium die-cast components for Jaguar Land Rover (JLR).

The two Whitehall officials were there to discuss the supply chain challenges facing the UK's automotive sector when Roberts dropped this into the conversation: "You're aware JLR's been down with its cyberattack from Sunday?"

"Oh, yes, we are aware of it," came the reply. Roberts pressed further: "So are you monitoring it? They went, 'Yeah, well, you know, I'm sure they'll get it fixed.' "

This weekend, that vague hope has been shattered. The West Midlands automotive sector has been plunged into its worst crisis since the pandemic enforced the shutdown of British carmaking.

JLR's cyberattack has not just brought production lines in the UK, Slovakia, Brazil and India to a standstill; its computer systems have been rendered useless. And without the ability to perform diagnostic tests, cars cannot be serviced properly at dealerships. Online catalogues of spare parts are inaccessible, and new vehicle sales cannot be registered.

Factory workers have been told not to come to work tomorrow as JLR's two main assembly plants at Solihull and Halewood, and its engine manufacturing centre in Wolverhampton, stand idle.

It can now be revealed that they face a long stint on the sidelines as hopes of a quick end to the saga have all but evaporated. "We said don't come into work on Friday and Monday. That does not mean come to work on Tuesday," one well-placed source said.

Behind closed doors, JLR bosses have conceded that bringing its systems back online will take "a matter of weeks rather than days". And there will be a "long tail of work that will take even longer", the person added.

More concerning, the plight of JLR is just the tip of the iceberg for a West Midlands economy dependent on the company and its Indian owner, Tata Motors.

"Jaguar Land Rover is an anchor institution," said Raj Kandola, chief executive of the Birmingham Chambers of Commerce. "It's not just about the people it employs directly, it's the supply chains."

Kandola is right to speak of contagion. Suppliers Evtec, WHS Plastics, SurTec and OPmobility are among those known to have temporarily laid off their workforces – just like JLR. This quartet alone employ more than 6,000 UK workers.

Evtec's Roberts said the fallout is far worse. "You're talking about many, many thousands of people who are currently waiting … [to] get back to work," he said.

The cyberattack that has brought JLR to its knees rounds off an *annus horribilis* for Britain's biggest carmaker – though in truth, this started in November last year with the relaunch of the Jaguar brand.

With boss Adrian Mardell bemoaning that the Jaguar brand "wasn't always distinctive enough in the last decade", its "growler" logo – the world-renowned Jaguar badge used for decades on grilles and bonnets – was dropped to attract younger, richer, independently minded urban customers. The new cars, due to be launched next year, would be all-electric and more expensive, with Jaguar looking to compete with more upmarket brands such as Bentley and Porsche.

Donald Trump would later brand the switch "stupid", "seriously WOKE" and a "total disaster". It was a sentiment with which many Jaguar enthusiasts agreed.

Yet Trump's comments were far less potent than his actions. On March 27, the US president unveiled import taxes of 25 per cent on cars and car parts. In recent years, America has become JLR's biggest single market, with about a quarter of the vehicles it makes shipped across the Atlantic. And unlike many of its rivals, JLR does not have a factory in the US that it can use to avoid the tariffs on sales to American customers. "We had, and we have, no plans to build cars in the US at this point in time," Mardell insisted later.

Eleven days after the Trump edict, JLR paused shipments to the US. The suspension lasted until May 3, days before Trump shelved plans for import taxes on cars. On May 8, Britain and America announced a trade deal under which 100,000 cars a year could be sold at a 10 per cent tariff – although this was four times higher than the pre-2025 rate of 2.5 per cent.

And yet on May 13, JLR unveiled its best return for a decade, raking in a £2.5 billion pre-tax profit in the 12 months to March. The performance was down to bumper sales of the Slovakian-made Land Rover Defender.

In early August, Mardell announced his shock decision to step down after just three years in charge. PB Balaji, finance chief at Tata Motors, was parachuted in as his replacement with plans to take JLR "to even greater heights".

But in the weeks after, the trajectory was downwards. In August it emerged that quarterly profits plunged 49 per cent in the wake of Trump's protectionism.

Then came the cyberattack.

David Bailey, professor of business economics at Birmingham University, said it is hard to overestimate the impact of last Sunday's breach. "This is pretty catastrophic for JLR. It comes hot on the heels of concerns about the electric vehicle transition and being hit by Trump tariffs," he argued.

"The hit to profits is going to be in the region of £5 million a day. And the longer this goes on, the worse this hit will be – and the greater the likelihood that customers will go elsewhere."

But a rapid resolution seems unlikely. "They can't give us a timeline," said the boss of one big JLR dealer.

Switching everything off before turning it back on again is easier said than done, and in the meantime, dealerships are forced into workarounds using third-party technology. Some work can now be done in the dealers as a result. But if there was a need for a major recall, for instance, it would be hard to get the message to customers.

JLR is offering updates every few hours to its retailers and suppliers. There have been "slow incremental improvements", said one. But it is clear that Britain's biggest carmaker has been poleaxed by the cyberattack. Responsibility has been claimed by a group called "Scattered Lapsus$ Hunters". The organisation is affiliated with a hacker collective known as The Com, which is connected to Scattered Spider, the group behind the hacks of M&S, Harrods and the Co-op.

"They haven't [made] a car all week," said Roberts at Evtec. "And because of no production and the complete loss of the systems, we're all sort of manually driven at the moment. So the biggest suppliers in the West Midlands have already laid off their workforces temporarily."

Roberts added: "Quite a lot of them were told to report back on Tuesday, unless we give them updated information early next week … And we're now waiting on JLR's feedback so the supply chain can react to it."

The feedback is unlikely to be positive, according to those close to JLR. Speculation is already building that production will be hit for "most of September". Company insiders worry it could be worse than that.

Roberts already fears that there is no quick fix. "Imagine trying to start up the Solihull assembly line on a brand new IT reset system. Every vehicle on that line has got its own Vin [vehicle identification number]. Every vehicle's got its own configuration," he said.

"You almost have to cleanse the line and start again, or you try to manually finish off these vehicles. And that's that, a big old process. That's not easy. If you've got to reset the whole system, it won't be a smooth start."

Andy Palmer, former operating chief at Nissan and ex-chief executive of Aston Martin, agrees. "Getting back up and running is really, really hard because you've got all of those sequence parts that you need to try to reorder into something that you can put together," he said.

The longer it takes to recover, the worse the financial pain. But move too quickly, and JLR could miss something and leave the door open for the hackers to return.

> **We said don't come into work on Friday and Monday. That does not mean come into work on Tuesday**

Water wrangles may sabotage Universal's UK theme park plan

➔**Continued from page 1**

align with the site's phasing". Countryside charity CPRE Bedfordshire said it had "no confidence that Anglian … will be able to supply the water requirements" needed "in an environmentally sustainable manner".

The Universal Studios development, welcomed in Westminster as a boost for Britain, threatens to become a new battleground in the water industry's struggles with its regulator.

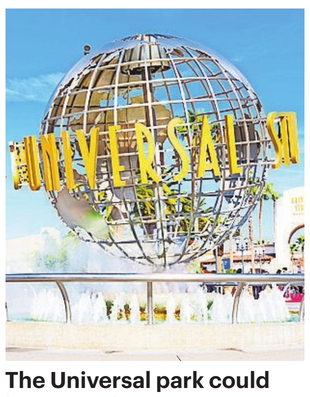
Companies such as Anglian want a regulatory overhaul that will enable them to raise prices in order to fund long-term investment in their infrastructure. Under the current system, they must agree a five-year investment plan with Ofwat, the regulator.

Anglian's latest deal, for 2025-30, was agreed last year, before Universal's plans were detailed. Water utilities have complained that in previous price settlements, Ofwat has been too focused on keeping customer bills low and this limited their ability to invest.

Anglian Water has pledged to work with Universal on the park, but it said: "The scale of new infrastructure and broken regulatory model, which does not enable us to get funding for future growth like this, means we need change from government and regulators to enable us to deliver that investment".

Ofwat dismissed Anglian's criticism, noting that its 2024 price review had approved £11 billion of spending. "This did not include the required investment for [the] Universal Studios park in Bedford as it was not submitted in the company's business plan nor any subsequent documents," an Ofwat spokesperson said.

Adam Zerny, head of Central Bedfordshire council, said: "The proposal for the Universal theme park … has been warmly welcomed by the public and local businesses. If the government approves the planning application, the council's role will be to continue to work closely with Universal to make sure the promised benefits come to our area."



The Universal park could bring £50bn into Britain

Drive-thru operator brews up plan to switch from Starbucks to Costa

Oliver Gill

Britain's biggest Starbucks operator is weighing an audacious move to jettison its sites to unlock a cut-price swoop on rival Costa coffee.

EG Group, owned by private equity firm TDR Capital and Blackburn forecourt tycoons Mohsin and Zuber Issa, is understood to be considering proposals to sell the franchise rights to the 140 Starbucks "drive-thru" and "drive-in" sites that it operates across the UK.

EG must do so to allow it or TDR to bid for Costa, whose owner, Coca-Cola, has begun sounding out potential suitors. The investment bank Lazard, has been appointed to oversee the process.

Starbucks' franchise agreement strictly prohibits direct and indirect investments in, or operating on behalf of, rivals.

Another alternative for EG is to let the agreement lapse, rather than renew it, when it expires at the end of this year.

The franchise agreement, however, also prohibits EG from operating a rival coffee chain in these sites for a further 12 months – in other words, until the end of 2026.

TDR has yet to confirm its interest in Costa. City sources cautioned that the private equity firm could be using it as a negotiating tactic to secure a more favourable agreement with Starbucks during renewal talks.

Costa was bought by Coca-Cola in 2018 for £3.9 billion from Whitbread, following a campaign against the FTSE 100 firm by activist investor Elliott. It has been reported that Coca-Cola may let Costa go for as little as £2 billion.

EG Group's food service arm also includes Cooplands, the UK's second-largest bakery chain. In addition, it runs Subway, Burger King, KFC and Taco John's franchises. The Issa brothers have a fortune of £6 billion, according to The Sunday Times Rich List. They opened their first petrol forecourt in Lancashire in 2001 before diversifying their interests.

Together with TDR, the siblings acquired Asda in October 2020 in a deal worth £6.8 billion.

Zuber Issa subsequently sold his stake and has since launched roadside-focused division EG On The Move.

TDR declined to comment.

£3.9bn

What Coca-Cola paid for Costa in 2018

BURGER BOSS FLIPPED

- Fast-food giant McDonald's prohibits "any kind of intimate relationship between employees". That caused problems for Steve Easterbrook, who took the top job at the Chicago-based business in March 2015, but left in November 2019.

At the time, he emailed employees to tell them that his consensual relationship with an employee had been a mistake: "Given the values of the company, I agree with the board that it is time for me to move on."

Brought up in Watford, he had joined McDonald's in 1993 and was one of the few British-born executives to make it to the top of corporate America. But in 2023, US regulator the Securities and Exchange Commission charged Easterbrook with making false and misleading statements to investors about the circumstances of his termination. He agreed to pay a $400,000 penalty but did not admit or deny the SEC's findings, which included that he had failed to disclose additional violations of company policy by having undisclosed relationships with other staff.

ROMANCE? WHAT ROMANCE?

- Most of the bosses forced out for "inappropriate" romantic entanglements are men. **Nadine Ahn** is a rare exception. She was finance director of Royal Bank of Canada when her employment was "terminated" after 20 years in April 2024. RBC accused her of having an undisclosed relationship with a subordinate who received fast-track promotions and bigger bonuses.

Ahn denied the allegations and is suing the bank for wrongful dismissal and nearly C$50 million, denying that her friendship with Ken Mason, a former employee of RBC, was romantic. RBC insisted its investigation showed there was "an undisclosed personal relationship".

Six months later, Ahn was hired for a senior finance role by the investment bank Canaccord Genuity, whose chief executive Dan Daviau called her "the most qualified candidate I could ever hire".

THE POWER OF LOVE

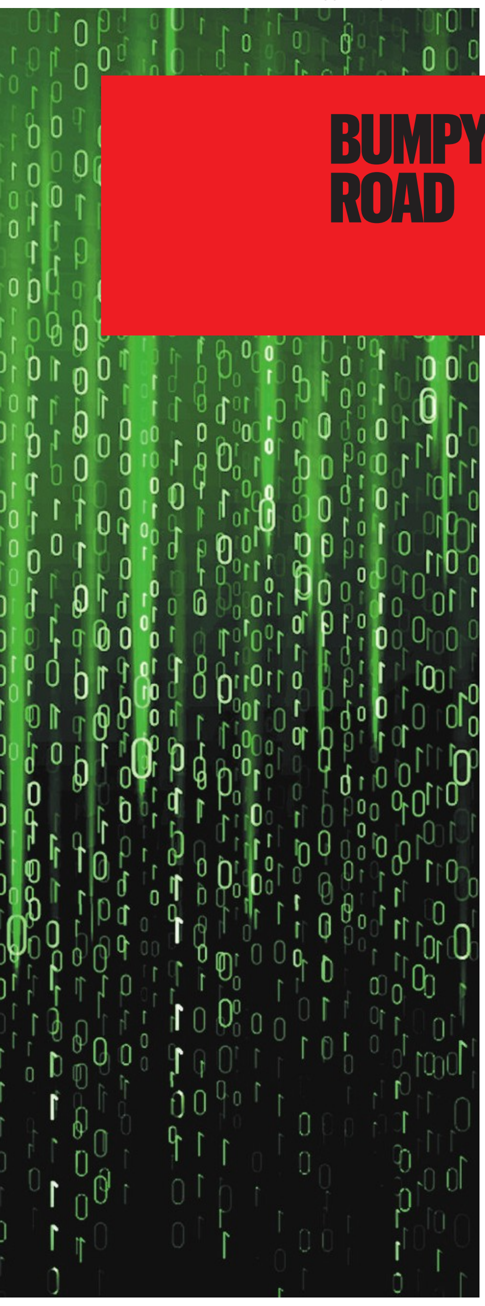
- **Brian Krzanich** resigned as the chief executive of Intel in 2018 after it found he was having a consensual relationship with an employee. That breached what the American semiconductor maker described as its "non-fraternisation policy".

By the time Krzanich left, he had been chief executive for five years. But he had worked his way up to the top job after joining in 1982.

Barely four months later, he was named chief executive of CDK Global, a Texan software business specialising in the automotive industry.

Last year, Krzanich joined the AI business Cerence as chief executive.

ILLUSTRATION: PETE BAKER



The hope is that the government will step in with financial support to cushion the impact on JLR's suppliers.

There is a precedent in this regard. In 2011, ministers provided £150 million of funding to the automotive supply chain as Nissan and Honda's UK production lines ground to a standstill following the earthquake in Japan that caused the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

"I don't know the JLR cost base, but you lose a few hours on a production line … that's an enormous amount," said Palmer. "It runs into billions, really, really quickly. So, more than any single company can withstand by themselves. So, yes, you probably end up with some form of [state] bailout."

In the meantime, it is not all doom and gloom. Sarah Hutchins runs the biggest independent supplier of Jaguar and Land Rover surplus stock in the UK from her base in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire.

"We can't access the parts catalogue," she explained. "It's very difficult to be able to answer customers' questions because you can't get access to the database. But equally, it's probably working a bit in our favour because where customers can't buy from the dealers at the moment, they're coming our way."

Even the previously optimistic government officials will have to concede that this is the thinnest of silver linings for a company and a sprawling supply chain that has been paralysed.

BUMPY ROAD

NOVEMBER 18

A 30-second advert for Jaguar, titled "Copy nothing", and featuring models in bright colours, below, is released, but it does not include a single car, prompting Elon Musk to ask Jaguar on its official X account: "Do you sell cars?"

MARCH 27

President Trump announces import taxes of 25 per cent on cars and car parts coming into the United States in a blow to JLR, which sells a quarter of the 400,000 cars it makes each year across the Atlantic

APRIL 7

JLR pauses shipments of its cars for what it expects to be a month

MAY 3

Shipments resume to the US shortly after Trump suspends plans for tariffs on car parts

MAY 8

Britain and America announce a trade deal to allow 100,000 cars a year from Britain to be exported at a 10 per cent tariff

MAY 13

The Indian-owned business records its strongest profit in a decade of £2.5 billion, with a 15 per cent year-on-year increase

AUGUST 1

After three years as chief executive, Adrian Mardell, left, announces his retirement plans after 35 years at the company

AUGUST 4

As PB Balaji is named the new chief executive, Trump attacks the advertising campaign as "stupid" and "woke"

SEPTEMBER 2

JLR reveals it has been hit by a cyberattack which has "severely disrupted" production

I struggled as a kid. Now my firm helps diagnose ADHD

HOW I MADE IT

NICOLA LATHEY, FOUNDER OF THE OWL CENTRE

Hannah Prevett

By the time the nine-year-old Nicola Lathey had completed the five-hour trip with her parents from their home in Fishguard, west Wales, to London for a dyslexia assessment, she had a pretty good idea that her brain worked slightly differently to her school friends.

"I was always on the bottom rung of the ladder with things like spelling tests," she recalled. "But mum and dad were very good at finding the positives and homing in on those."

A year after her diagnosis, her brother Stephen was born with Down's syndrome. Despite the initial "huge shock", Lathey said she loved caring for her little brother and assisting the health professionals involved in his care. She was particularly taken by the speech therapist. "I used to make up little games using the resources she'd suggested to help him build his vocabulary."

So it was no surprise when she declared a couple of years later that she wanted to pursue a career as a speech therapist. After graduating from University College London (UCL), she worked in the NHS for 13 years, making a name for herself as an expert in treating under-fives, before opening a private practice in 2011 that became known as The Owl Centre. It now specialises in autism and ADHD diagnoses and speech and language therapy, has 105 staff and works with a further 400 on a freelance basis. It generated sales of £8.1 million and a pre-tax profit of £176,000 last year.

Lathey said she was inspired to start the business partly as a result of her own experience being tested in London for dyslexia – the learning difficulty that causes problems in processing and remembering information.

"I remember the IQ test, and there were questions where I didn't have a clue what they were on about. But mainly I remember being alone in the assessment room," Lathey recalled.

When she went on to secondary school, she started to struggle more academically and her family worried she was getting in with the wrong crowd, so a great aunt offered to pay the fees to send her to the private Haberdashers' Monmouth School in Wales.

Lathey knuckled down and defied expectations to do well enough in her GCSEs to win a place at sixth-form college. "Everyone was like, 'holy moly' … they started to see me through a different lens."

She moved to London to study speech sciences at UCL, where she was considered a "disabled student" due to her dyslexia. "I was known to the disability unit. I barely used it but they … gave me this voice synthesiser system."

After graduating, she initially moved back to Wales and got a job working for the local NHS for three years – "I loved it and I paid off all my student loans" – before realising that to "spread my wings", she would have to move back to the capital. The next job, at the Royal Free hospital in Hampstead, northwest London, was where she met her husband Rhodri and they moved together to Oxford, where they started The Owl Centre.

At first their practice taught English to foreign students, but when that failed to pay the bills, Lathey started offering private speech therapy sessions. Her father-in-law invested £5,000, which was enough to create a website, put in a phone line and pay for some basic resources and toys for the children's assessments. He still owns a 19 per cent stake in the company.

As demand for the firm's services outstripped its ability to supply them -– initially, Lathey was still working part-time in the NHS – she enlisted help from friends and colleagues and then left the NHS altogether in 2012. "Leaving the stability and the camaraderie of the NHS was a lot to say goodbye to," she recalled.

The next big tipping point was publishing her first book in 2013, *Small Talk: Simple ways to boost your child's speech and language development from birth*, which put her on the map as an expert.

The company grew quickly, and by the time the Latheys and their daughter, Jessica, now 14, had moved to Cheltenham in Gloucestershire in 2015, they had opened further Owl Centres in Hertfordshire, Manchester and Cardiff.

> When I went to study at UCL, I was considered a 'disabled student'

Today, the company operates two physical sites in Cheltenham and Oxford, as well as an operational office from Pontypool. However, the large majority of assessments are done online.

According to its website, online assessments for autism among both adults and children cost £2,000, while prices for ADHD testing start at £950. Dyslexia assessments come in at £750.

Lathey said the company does between 500 and 700 assessments a month, with private clients accounting for a third of those, NHS contacts another third, and corporate clients making up the remainder. The Owl Centre's private assessments can be used by parents to petition councils for healthcare plans for their children.

The Owl Centre won its first big NHS contract in Manchester in 2018 as the public health service struggled to keep up with demand for assessments for neurodiversity. It has not been alone in this. That demand continues to surge, and despite private firms plugging gaps, waiting times for diagnoses on the NHS can stretch into many years.

A report last year from the Nuffield Trust think tank found that since 2019, there had been a fivefold increase in people waiting to see an autism specialist and a 51 per cent rise in prescriptions to treat ADHD. It said 172,000 people were on a waiting list for an autism assessment.

What does Lathey make of criticisms, including from former health secretary Sir Jeremy Hunt, that there has been "an alarming escalation" in the diagnoses of neuro-developmental conditions among both adults and children – with Hunt citing "excessive impulses to medicalise and diagnose"?

"It's true there's been a huge increase in the rate of diagnosis across the country, particularly among adults," Lathey said. But she added: "That is because [the signs] have been missed in childhood, not necessarily because everyone is jumping on the [wellbeing] bandwagon. We have very strict diagnostic criteria."

She said that for both adults and children, a diagnosis is important not just to ensure they can gain access to the right help and resources, but also to provide a better understanding of what makes them tick.

"Girls in particular mask a lot of their autistic traits, and in teenage years you can have children who are highly anxious and are really struggling with mental health.

"At that point, they might be sent for an autism assessment," said Lathey. "But had it been picked up sooner, they'd have understood themselves better and found their tribe sooner."

Since hiring a chief executive in 2022, Lathey, who is now separated from her husband, has published a new book, *What to Do When Your child Isn't Talking*, and has had more time to return to clinical practice. "I absolutely love it," she said.

"I love working with families and children – and I love watching the company grow."

ADRIAN SHERRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Nicola Lathey: 'I love working with families and children'

ASK ME ANYTHING

My hero … my English teacher at school, Nick Wright. English was my awful subject but he believed in me. And I went on to become an author.
The best advice I was given … Embrace difficult conversations.
The turning point … winning our first NHS contract in 2018.
The failure that taught me everything … I've always had this motto of "Make your story your strength", and whether it's my younger brother being born with Down's syndrome or my dyslexia, I've never allowed these things to bring me down. I'm a very positive person.
The best way to start the day … with a cup of Earl Grey tea in bed, accompanied by my eight-year-old labrador, Hegel.

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CURRENT ACCOUNT SWITCH GUARANTEE

Are there too many economic gurus in Downing Street?

Labour's economic team lacks private sector experience — and they've been plucked from the so-called Leftocracy, argues *Jim Armitage*

When an Egyptian-born career bureaucrat was made a deputy governor at the Bank of England, the response among many of its employees was a perplexed scratching of heads. True, Minouche Shafik had risen through the ranks at the Department for International Development, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but this role – one of four deputies to Mark Carney, the dashing new governor – seemed off-beam.

"It was a WTF moment," recalled an economist who worked there. "She was deputy governor overseeing the financial markets and banking," he said: "But she'd never done markets and she'd never done banking."

She resigned two years into her five-year term.

In parts of the City, there were similar baffled responses to Sir Keir Starmer's hiring of Baroness Shafik, as she now is, to the new role of chief economic adviser to the prime minister.

After all, it was only last year that she quit her job running Columbia University in New York. And that came less than two years into the role amid criticisms from all sides about her handling of campus demonstrations over Israel's war in Gaza.

For many observers, it was far less surprising. Shafik was just the latest of the high-profile left-leaning technocrats – the leftocracy, if you will – being bussed into Downing Street as Starmer and Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, tried to bring in some economic brainpower before a difficult budget on November 26.

While the moves were overshadowed by the giant reshuffle on Friday, they will be key as the pair try to piece together a budget to plug an estimated £25 billion hole in the public finances. And, as far as many in business are concerned, they reinforce the government's biggest problem: too few senior leaders from the private sector are on board.

It is a perception worsened by the reshuffle resignation on Friday of Baroness (Poppy) Gustafsson, the former chief executive of British cybersecurity company Darktrace, who had been leading the office for investment.

Sir Philip Hampton, the former chairman of Royal Bank of Scotland, GlaxoSmithKline and J Sainsbury, said of Starmer and Reeves's team: "They are very much the lanyard classes. Economic growth for them is an aspiration or arguably just a slogan with no persuasive platform for delivery."

Reeves also hired the pensions minister Torsten Bell to be one of her top economic advisers last month to help decide which taxes to raise. Bell is famed for having run the Resolution Foundation, the left-leaning think tank, from 2015 to 2024. The RF is central to the Labour left's economic thinking, calling for tax rises and stronger workers' rights.

Bell has been vocal about reforming pensions, calling for the triple lock to be ditched and cutting the size of the tax-free lump sum.

Alongside him in the Treasury, Reeves hired Daniel Tomlinson MP, who worked for the think tank for eight years, latterly as senior economist. Shafik is closely associated with the RF, too, co-authoring its 2023 report *Ending Stagnation*, which called for higher levies on the wealthy, beefed-up workers' rights and bigger welfare payments, all ideas fiercely opposed by most employers.

Tomlinson and Bell were recruited to fill the holes left by Starmer's nabbing of two of Reeves's top advisers: Dan York-Smith, the highly rated Treasury and HMRC lifer, and Darren Jones MP, a former Bristol solicitor who was once an in-house lawyer at BT.

Some saw the York-Smith and Jones moves as a pre-budget power grab from Reeves's Treasury by Starmer, with Shafik potentially setting up a rival empire to Reeves. In fact, moves from the Treasury to No 10 are not uncommon, although former advisers warned Shafik could set up her own separate power base to Reeves.

Shafik's talents divide opinion. Several leading economists talked sceptically of her economic credentials, citing a lack of academic papers and rigour. As a manager, she quit the Bank of England for a five-year stint running the London School of Economics, where a fellow board member recalls: "She did all right, but wasn't a perfect fit amid all those big egos." The role at Columbia was arguably impossible; she was one of several major university leaders who lost their jobs in the US amid clashes between pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian students.

Paul Drechsler, former president of the Confederation of British Industry, was positive about her: "She is highly intelligent, highly collaborative and respected widely."

Two former colleagues at the Bank described her as "fantastic", with one saying: "No 10 are lucky to have her."

As well as the lack of business and markets nous in the new line-up ("Where is the guy with the Bloomberg terminal?", asks one former adviser), there were concerns last week over there being "too many cooks" among the new advisers.

> **It's vital that their roles are clearly defined**

Baroness Shafik and Torsten Bell have been drafted in as expert advisers

Friday's move of Pat McFadden from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Work & Pensions removed one potential overlap in the crowded No 10 roles, but one former official there said: "You have a lot of new people in there with similar-sounding economics-y jobs. It feels like the pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other.

"It's going to be really important that their roles are clearly defined or they will be doubling up and getting in each other's way. It works best when it's a small, tight unit of people who get on well together."

As for Shafik, he suggested appointing someone with such big-name economics institutions on her CV could have been largely symbolic. "It's a way for Labour to kill off the attack line that Starmer's team is underweight on economics. They can say: 'look, we've got Minouche.'

"A key part of Minouche's job is to represent the insanely busy prime minister to other departments, particularly the Treasury. That means knowing instinctively what he would think when they come up with proposals and ideas. She doesn't have that yet, so how long will it take to build that relationship?"

One businessman working in a government advisory role said Starmer was beefing up his advice from the private sector. He pointed to the hires of John Fallon, the former chief executive of Pearson, the education publishing company, and Jim O'Neil, a former Bank of America banker.

For Hampton, however, it is nowhere near good enough. "It's very unlike New Labour, where Blair, Mandelson, Brown and others, while not having any business experience, wanted businesses to succeed and didn't want trade unions to constrain economic growth too much.

"There's almost no determined political voice for business in the UK. It's always secondary to the NHS, welfare spending and any issue of the day."

For him, as long as the risk-averse leftocracy has a state-heavy grip on policymaking, Britain's economic problems will continue.

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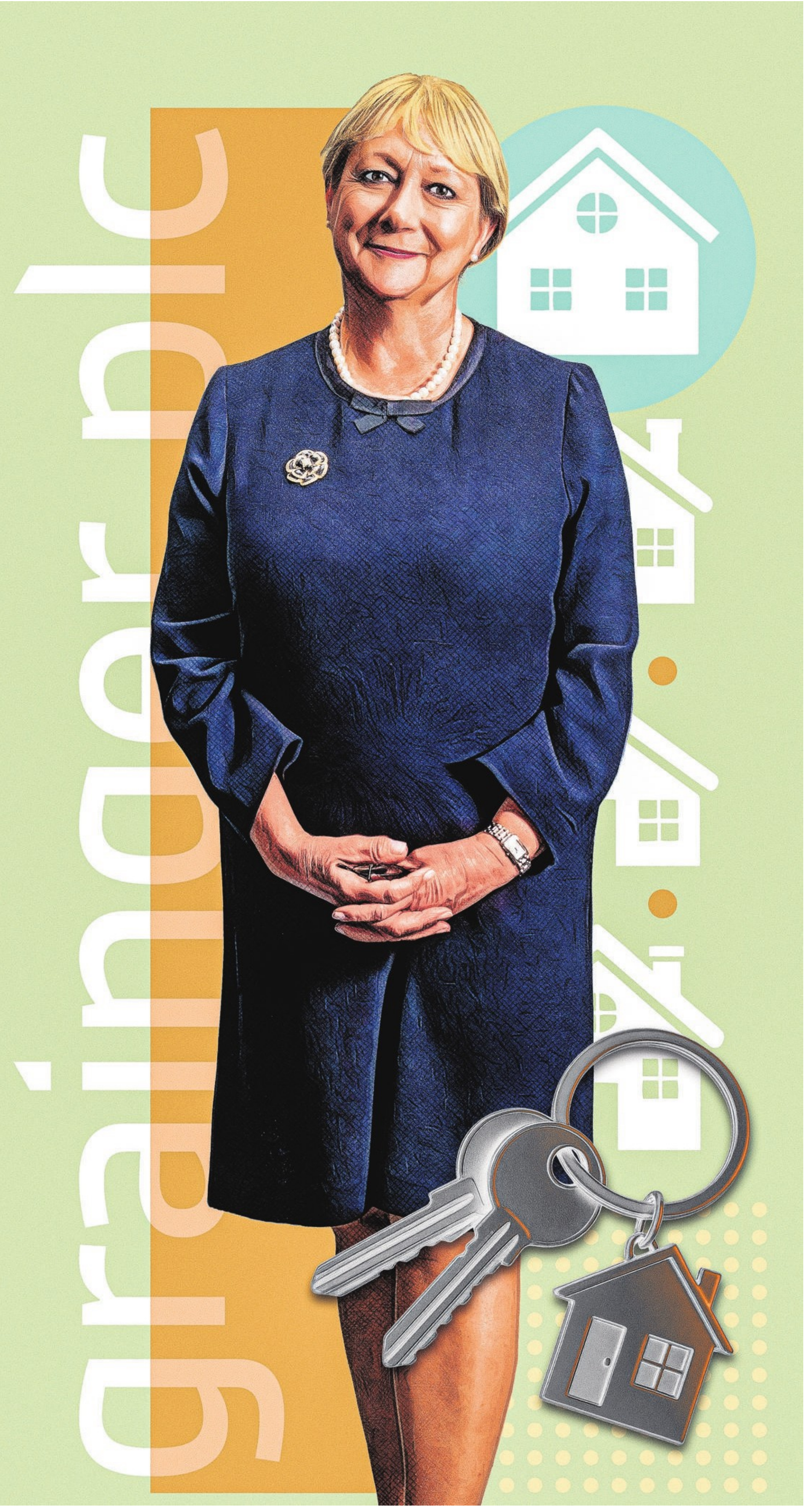
INTERVIEW
OLIVER GILL

PHOTOGRAPHY: LUCY YOUNG; ILLUSTRATION TONY BELL



'Buy to let isn't the enemy. It can solve the housing crisis'

Helen Gordon, the head of Grainger — Britain's biggest listed residential landlord — says the stigma towards renting is misplaced. And she reveals why she never goes out for lunch

On the south bank of the River Thames between London Bridge and Tower Bridge, the former City Hall building – the "glass testicle" as Ken Livingstone, the former London mayor, once called it – lies vacant. And it has done ever since Sir Sadiq Khan, the current mayor, decamped to Newham in east London in 2022.

This vacant property is the one blot on this revamped part of London, which boasts a raft of glass-fronted offices, casual dining chains and coffee shops to keep the accountants and lawyers who work there fed and caffeinated.

It wasn't always like this, as Helen Gordon, the chief executive of the property developer and residential landlord Grainger, explains in her office in the heart of the district. "This whole area was awash with foxes – it was just a wild part of London," she recalls. "It [the City Hall site] was going to be, at one stage, the world headquarters of *Cirque du Soleil*. But then the mayor's office came. There's a link there somewhere with the clowns."

She tails off, almost swallowing the final sentence before suppressing a giggle. It is a pleasant slip – potentially deliberate – from an executive with a reputation for being thoughtful and quietly spoken.

Grainger might not attract the attention of larger developers such as Segro, British Land and Landsec, but with more than 11,000 homes on its books, collectively worth £3.5 billion, it is the UK's largest listed landlord for rental homes.

Tomorrow the business will become a real estate investment company (Reit) – a move that could make it more appealing to investors for tax reasons.

Gordon, 66, is determined to convince the City of the merits of Grainger, which has had a mixed performance under her tenure. Yes, the dividend has grown since she took charge in 2016, but the share price is down more than 10 per cent. "It's a huge disappointment," she concedes.

Grainger's shares fell sharply after Labour's victory last year, with the residential buy-to-let sector caught up in the wider malaise affecting the property market.

"[We're] very different from office blocks, shopping centres and other forms of real estate," she protests. "So I think we've been unfairly bracketed."

Her argument is that because Grainger's occupancy levels hover around 96 to 98 per cent, the company does not suffer from the vacancies more prevalent in the commercial sector.

The business traces its history to 1912, when the Grainger Trust was formed in Newcastle upon Tyne by the prominent Dickinson family. The trust went on to acquire large estates of houses from British Rail and the National Coal Board, particularly in the decades following the Second World War. The organisation floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1983 and expanded its business beyond regulated tenancies. It also grew by acquisition, buying the Bradford Property Trust in 2003, for instance.

Gordon would like people in Westminster to understand that large buy-to-let landlords such as Grainger are part of the solution in hitting housebuilding targets – not part of the problem of unaffordable homes.

"Generation Rent", predominantly younger people who believe they may never be able to buy their own home, has done a lot to damage the reputation of companies such as Grainger amid complaints that a shortfall in the availability of homes has caused rents to soar as landlords cash in on a supply/demand imbalance. But Gordon insists that her industry is not the enemy.

Labour has set a target of building 1.5 million homes in England this parliament. Larger corporate landlords such as Grainger can play an important role in achieving this, Gordon says.

"If you ask the [bigger] housebuilders, they'll talk about a sales rate of two or four a month. We launched a building earlier this summer. In the first week, we rented out 22 of the premises." She continues: "We did a scheme in Salford [Greater Manchester], where we delivered eight years' supply of housing in 18 months on that site."

> **At the age of 24 I was running some of the UK's biggest projects**

Critics of the buy-to-let market will argue that it is stopping people getting onto the property ladder because high rents mean they cannot afford to build up enough money for a deposit.

Gordon, unsurprisingly, sees things differently.

Grainger has developments in 11 big cities including Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. Tenants are able to swap their lease for a different property, for example, if they get a job that requires them to relocate.

"Our main demographic, which is 20 to 40-year-olds, should be having an easy time before all the hassles of later life kick in," she says.

Gordon's beginnings lie in Altrincham, south Manchester; she still retains a trace of a Lancastrian twang. She studied estate management at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University) in a decision that perhaps showed a surprising lack of due diligence by the budding student.

"I never realised that estate management or real estate was such a male-dominated profession. I just looked at the curriculum and thought, this looks so interesting," Gordon explains.

Graduation led to a job at a property company. But the role left her downtrodden. "They would always have the women doing property management ... but never on the creative side of development."

So when the opportunity came up to expand the new town of Milton Keynes, Gordon jumped at the chance. "At the age of 24, I was running some of the biggest developments in the UK," she says.

She was poached by John Laing, one of Milton Keynes' major building contractors, and went on to become the firm's first female director. From there, Gordon moved to Railtrack, the newly privatised FTSE 100 company that owned the country's stations, tracks, signals and other rail infrastructure.

Railtrack collapsed in late 2001, but as head of property, it was Gordon's job to sell off its only valuable assets to repay creditors – among them, the insurance giant Legal & General, which brought her in to run its main life fund once she had completed her work for Railtrack. After that, she led the unwinding of Royal Bank of Scotland's global portfolio of property in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis, before taking the helm at Grainger.

If my PR and I went out for lunch, they'd think it was a ladies' lunch and not think that we are both very busy executives, says Helen Gordon

Baroness (Margaret) Ford, a former New Labour adviser, ex-chairman of Grainger and current chair of Gatwick airport, summarises Gordon's management style.

"She doesn't have to be aggressive because she just is very clear about what she's doing, and she's great at taking people with her," says Ford.

"She's as hard as nails, but she can also be the most charming person on the planet."

Gordon is also known for eating lunch at her desk rather than going out. She explains why: "If Ginny [her PR adviser] and I went out for lunch, they'd think it was a ladies' lunch and not think that we are both very busy executives. Instead, it is the men who always get the bill first – they get the food first."

It seems far-fetched but Gordon insists it is true. Restaurant staff "just assume", she says. "The reality is you end up being out of the office for two and a half hours because the waiters won't take you seriously."

Grainger is about to enter a new era as a Reit. The switch means that 75 per cent of its profits and assets in the property rental sector, and 90 per cent of its earnings, must be distributed to shareholders by way of dividends. In return, Reits are exempt from corporation tax on dividends and capital gains tax arising from the sale of properties.

Investing in residential Reits, such as Grainger, could soon be more appealing if the Treasury follows through on proposals to apply national insurance to rental income.

Reports have suggested that slapping such a tax on buy-to-let landlords could act as a catalyst for increasing housing supply, by forcing individual property owners to sell their buy-to-let investments, and raise £2 billion for the exchequer.

Gordon, who sits on the government's New Towns Taskforce, has little skin in the game on this topic; as a corporate rather than an individual, Grainger would not be affected by the proposals. Nevertheless, she says the government would be rather "naive" if it thinks chasing out residential landlords is a tool to increase housing stock.

"You've still got to have people able and willing to take on a mortgage and able to find a deposit," she explains. "And if those people don't exist, you're just actually making the rental market a lot worse. You're taking properties out of it and not necessarily putting them into a healthy sales market ... It's just making life harder for renters and not necessarily improving the housing numbers overall."

Gordon's argument is that buy-to-let investors might be better off buying Grainger shares anyway, especially once the tax-efficient Reit switch is rubber-stamped. It is, of course, a rather self-serving argument and ignores the fact that those investing directly in a property can benefit from borrowing against that asset to turbocharge returns.

But Gordon explains: "If you are a buy-to-let investor at the moment, you get your rent and you pay tax. In the corporate world, we obviously pay a lower rate of corporation tax, but [from tomorrow] we will pay no corporation tax on our rents."

In effect rental income "will be distributed by us tax-free", she says. In other words, this is a perfectly legal way to avoid paying tax on investing in the property market – especially if the shares are held in an Isa.

The new-look Grainger will be hoping investors like what they see.

THE LIFE OF HELEN GORDON

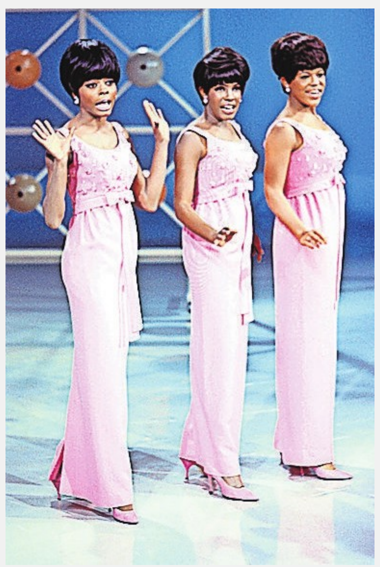
Born: May 1959
Status: married
Education: Sale Girls' Grammar, Oxford Polytechnic (BSc in estate management)
First job: The Real Estate Agent, Manchester
Pay: £583,000
Homes: London, Cornwall
Car: BMW 4 Series
Favourite film: *As Good as it Gets*, starring Jack Nicholson
Book: *Middlemarch* by George Eliot
Music: anything from Mozart to Motown
Drink: crisp white Burgundy
Watch: Ebel/Longines
Gadget: iPhone
Last holiday: Anglesey with all the family (ages from 2 to 92)
Charities: LandAid and Alzheimer's Society

WORKING DAY

The chief executive of Grainger gets up very early (around 5am) and does an hour's quiet reading before the working day starts in the office just after 8am; Gordon finishes at 7pm. She breakfasts or dines with business contacts but rarely lunches.

DOWNTIME

In Cornwall ... or anywhere near water



Motown is a music favourite

Hannah Prevett

'Up or out' has merits, but it needn't be a bloodsport

How would you feel if your boss told you that, no matter how well the company does in the next year, those deemed the worst-performing staff will be out the door?

This is the reality facing thousands of Lloyds Banking Group staff after it was reported last week that the UK's largest high street bank is overhauling its "performance management" programme, with about 3,000 people among the bottom 5 per cent potentially facing the boot.

Despite outrage on social media – one LinkedIn writer said they felt "sickened to see human beings ... reduced to numbers on a spreadsheet" – the truth is that performance management has been around for decades. This HR process, used by organisations to set goals and track progress, was very severe when popularised by Jack Welch, then boss of General Electric, in the 1980s . He had a "rank and yank" approach where staff were graded on a curve. The top 20 per cent were then rewarded, the middle 70 per cent developed, and the bottom 10 per cent fired each year. He argued that this relentless culling kept GE lean, competitive and packed with top talent.

Where GE led, others followed. It is thought that management consultants, law firms, investment banks and some of the world's largest tech firms, including Amazon and Uber, have used "up or out" models. Reed Hastings, the Netflix co-founder, is said to favour the "keeper test" where managers regularly assess whether they would fight to keep an employee; if not, the individual is let go with a generous severance package.

But what place does such tough love have in today's business environment?

Proponents say rigorous performance management is vital for competitiveness. With UK productivity growth still sluggish and employment costs at an all-time high, many leaders want more bang for their buck and feel they cannot afford to carry staff who fail to deliver.

Ann Francke, chief executive of the Chartered Management Institute, said she is "not against" this HR process if it is "transparent" and "objective" – and not "all about who does the best job of catering to the boss".

One argument in favour of these schemes is that if high-flyers see weaker colleagues shielded indefinitely from the consequences of poor performance, confidence in the system collapses. Taking decisive action against consistent underachievers, this thinking goes, protects those who deliver. "If you're a high performer, you don't want somebody who's ... just skiving along and getting promoted," said Francke.

Another factor is that for many firms, their revolving doors have stopped spinning and few employees are leaving or new ones arriving. According to the Financial Times, which first reported the Lloyds story, the bank is keen to increase staff turnover, which is now thought to be about 5 per cent against a historic rate of 15 per cent. A decent level of churn is thought preferable as new staff bring fresh perspectives, skills and ideas into a business, which can prevent stagnation and foster innovation.

However, critics warn that cutting a fixed percentage of staff is a blunt instrument. In a tight labour market, it risks forcing out capable people simply because the "curve" demands it.

Collaboration between colleagues can suffer, too, as they feel pitted against one another in a "survival of the fittest" culture, said David D'Souza at the CIPD, the professional body for HR staff. "It creates an environment where you are trying to out-compete the people around you because you don't want to be in that bottom category and you want the rewards from the top category."

And it's not easy to get it right. The latest *Management and Expectations Survey* for the Office for National Statistics found that British companies score just 0.42 out of 1 on using key performance indicators, such as setting formal targets, regularly monitoring progress and acting on the data accordingly.

Despite the potential pitfalls, a tightening labour market could mean other organisations follow in Lloyds' footsteps. Employment fell by 0.5 per cent in the three months to August – the largest decline since 2021 – according to a survey from the Bank of England published last week.

"In the pandemic, all the power was with the employee, but now everything's tightening," said Francke. "There's also the rise of AI and all of that is creating greater concern about job security, which means the balance is shifting back in favour of the employer. So this kind of performance management culture, I think, will come back."

The smart approach seems to be not toughness for its own sake but fairness and clarity. That means setting clear goals, giving timely feedback and addressing underperformance with coaching and support, before moving to staff departures. A system that develops people while acting decisively when improvement fails is more sustainable than ritual sackings.

This means the firms most likely to thrive will be those that stretch people to excel – and know when to let go without turning performance management into a bloodsport.

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Broker Lizzie Rooke and Brian Randall of Brit Insurance talk in an underwriting "box" at Lloyd's, whose futuristic design contrasts with the market's ancient practices

VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

REVIVING THE CITY

Is Lloyd's fit to ride out the rough seas ahead?

At Lloyd's of London, old customs die hard, despite the rise of technology. *Jill Treanor* receives a unique insight into how it works

Huge steel pipes wind around the building and lifts zip up and down outside. You can't miss this landmark on Lime Street in the heart of London's financial district. But mystery often surrounds what goes on inside.

This is the Lloyd's of London insurance market, where £60 billion worth of contracts are sold each year to protect almost anything: container ships at sea, oil rigs and wind farms, property damaged by hurricanes, satellite launches, cyberattacks and concert cancellations. It is said that David Beckham's legs, Bruce Springsteen's voice and even the tongue of a coffee taster for Costa have been insured here.

David Howden, chief executive of the eponymous insurance company Howden, described it as the "jewel in the crown of our financial services industry" and an "unsung hero", as it provides businesses with the cover they need to protect their operations.

Lloyd's is the best-known insurance market in the world. Having started life in a nearby coffee house run by Edward Lloyd in 1688, the sector now generates 2 per cent of the UK's gross domestic product. It has been singled out by Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, as an area she hopes will generate growth and designated a "frontier industry" by the government. So what does go on inside this building and what does its future hold?

Rooted in history

Until 11.30am each day, Lloyd's is eerily quiet. Then the zig-zag escalators connecting its three expansive underwriting floors begin to fill with men and women who have been working in nearby offices. Lloyd's is an umbrella organisation that hosts about 85 companies – known as syndicates – catering to different markets.

Lloyd's employs 1,500 people directly but an estimated 2,500 insurance staff use its underwriting floors, where they gather at neatly arranged desks. Above each desk – or "box" – is a sign with a number to signify the syndicate. When The Sunday Times visited, sitting under sign number 2987 was Lizzie Rooke. She is a broker, looking for insurance for one of her clients at Alesco, and was in discussion with Brian Randall, at Brit Insurance, which operates this syndicate.

As the din of voices filled the cavernous hall, Rooke, carrying a traditional Lloyd's leather case, with expandable leather straps to accommodate bulging pieces of paper marked with bulldog clips, said she would often walk to one of the other boxes to start another discussion.

"Typically, we have a lead underwriter who will set the terms and conditions – they might take 10 per cent of the risk – and then I will walk [this document] around until I obtain agreement from various … syndicates to get it to 100 per cent."

Rooke's description explains Lloyd's "subscription model". Janet Henderson, group executive underwriter at Brit Insurance, said the idea dated back three centuries to when people met in Edward Lloyd's coffee shop. "The shipowners would go to the coffee house, wait for the ship to come in and, when it didn't, they were ruined. But someone had this brilliant idea: 'Why don't we all put a little bit of money in the pot and then we all lose a bit, but nobody's completely ruined.' "

> **Staff are greeted by a 'waiter' in a blue jacket and red collar**

Much of the terminology of Lloyd's dates back to those times. Staff and visitors are greeted by a "waiter" sporting a long blue jacket with a red-trimmed collar. One of them, Diego De Candido, said he had to take calligraphy lessons so he could fill in the huge leather-bound book that still records ships lost at sea.

This legacy in shipping looms large as the huge wooden clock that sits in the centre of the underwriting hall houses the Lutine Bell, which used to ring when ships were lost but is now used only on ceremonial occasions.

Even the way the brokers and underwriters interact carries the hallmarks of history. The underwriters show their dominance by having a chair in their boxes, while the brokers sit on a stool to ensure they do not get too comfortable.

Keeping competitive

It is surprising these practices survive. After all, Lloyd's operates in a world grappling with AI and facing competition from centres in Bermuda, Singapore, Zurich and New York. And as the market generates about half its business in America, it is vulnerable to policy shocks from Donald Trump.

It has also endured controversy over its culture, such as lunchtime drinking and sexist behaviour. And management upheaval dented its credibility after John Neal resigned as chief executive at the start of the year to take up a role in the industry, but stayed on for five months while the market waited for its new chairman, Sir Charles Roxburgh, to arrive to replace the outgoing Bruce Carnegie-Brown. At the same time, the finance director quit.

After former Treasury mandarin Roxburgh arrived in May, he appointed insider Patrick Tiernan as chief executive.

As Tiernan presented his first set of results last week, the challenges were clear. Insurance is a cyclical industry and pressure is building after "hard" years of higher premiums. Rates are "softening", while profits are being hit by rising claims.

Underwriting profits in the first half of the year halved to £1.5 billion, partly because of the cost of claims from damage caused by Californian wildfires, although overall pre-tax did not fall as much – to £4.2 billion from £4.9 billion.

Speaking from his office on the 12th and top floor of this inside-out building, Tiernan said his review of the insurance market – which won't be published until March – would reduce costs for users of the market. He said he would be asking: "Is there anything we're doing – ways that we're working – that's driving any additional regulatory burden or expense burden to the market."

Someone who knows Lloyd's said keeping costs down was key. "It's competing with other speciality markets in Bermuda and Zurich but also the corporate market [using a big insurer]. It's very old, but other markets are catching up."

In what some saw as a big embarrassment, Tiernan had to admit Lloyd's delayed IT project to move its 40-year-old mainframe computers to the cloud, known as Blueprint Two, would not take place until 2028, four years later than planned. Some of Lloyd's mainframes are so old their screens still display "flashing green cursors", Roxburgh told The Sunday Times earlier this year, although he said they were "working fine".

On the Lloyd's floor, Serena France-Hayhurst, a cyber-expert at Marsh, the world's biggest insurance broker, had been talking to Lucy Russell, a specialist cyber underwriter from Canopius. They explain that much of the information required for cyber insurance starts with questionnaires and negotiations in offices rather than in the building, but "there is a bit more of a resurgence of brokers coming and sitting in front of underwriters".

Modern technology is visible across the floor but some think the market is ripe for technological advances. Freddie Trusselle, a partner at Lloyd's broker McGill and Partners, said: "There's always a need for the floor … but do you need as many physical bodies in that room? Probably not, because what you can do is use your technology to be much more efficient in how you transact with one another. This isn't about replacing people; it's about empowering them to work smarter."

For now, some of the underwriters are said to give better terms to those brokers who turn up in person on the floors, which fill up between 11.30am and 1pm and again between 2.30pm and 4.30pm.

Perhaps that adds to Tiernan's view about the significance of the distinctive building: "It acts as a beacon, a nodal point to the marketplace."

Marco Armitrano

Why I will be hiring fewer graduates at PwC this year

Hundreds of graduates and school-leavers will join PwC this month. The September intake is always the largest, bringing a sea of fresh faces, perspectives and curiosity. Having myself joined the accountancy firm as a graduate, I remember the sense of excitement and possibility. But that was 33 years ago. The world of work has changed beyond recognition since then – and will be transformed again.

PwC will always be a large employer and training ground for young people in the UK. We are a people business at heart, supporting clients with skills and experience on the ground. But the way we do things is changing. Our entry-level intake is lower this year – 1,300 compared with 1,500 the year before – and understanding why is the key to growing opportunities for the next generation at PwC and elsewhere.

There has been no shortage of headlines about AI displacing jobs, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors such as professional and business services. The reality is more nuanced. Innovation in AI is certainly reshaping roles. For now, the development of new tools and the parallel investment in skills are offsetting more serious disruption.

Yet this balance may not last forever. Our research shows that job postings for AI-exposed occupations are growing at a slower pace compared to those with lower exposure – and this gap is widening.

I remain optimistic, however. Most technologies, if not all, have boosted both productivity and wages. Indeed, the integration of AI with other technologies, products and services has the potential to create new industries. But potential doesn't convert to progress on its own; it requires sustained investment in tech, infrastructure and training – underpinned by progressive policy. With the right choices, we could not only adapt to disruption but reverse the decline in productivity that has held back the UK.

The government's modern industrial strategy is a welcome step, creating a framework to significantly increase business investment in eight growth-driving sectors, including professional services. But to translate this into action, the prioritisation of growth must now run through every area of government policy, from shaping tax change to drawing people back into the workforce and workplace.

Right now, many businesses – both domestic and international – are watching and waiting. Activity is improving, but it's still far removed from the levels of investment, hiring and deal-making that we saw immediately after the pandemic. This slowdown is the single biggest factor behind a lower graduate intake at PwC this year.

In a global context of serial volatility, stability becomes more than just a macroeconomic ambition; it's a strategic imperative, and a critical differentiator. Consistent policy signals, credible regulatory reform and a more predictable tax environment are not simply enablers of investment; they are preconditions for job creation.

> **The UK needs to be at the forefront of the global market**

Efforts to streamline regulation so far have landed well with our clients and are hopefully the start of more systemic change. The tax environment, however, is more uncertain. While changes may be unavoidable, every shift has repercussions, especially when the global market is more competitive and accessible than ever before.

We see this dynamic in professional services – global delivery teams allow us to scale faster and operate around the clock. They will only ever be part of the mix, though, because our strength also depends on local knowledge, people rooted in communities, building strong relationships with clients and developing the skills that our economy needs. But where it makes sense, and where it helps us remain competitive, we must draw on a global dimension.

The UK needs to be at the forefront of the global market and to strengthen its economic position. It has the raw ingredients – a leading education sector, vibrant regional economies and a proud history of industrial ingenuity – but alongside the industrial strategy, we need credible cross-industry policies to reduce costs, attract overseas investment and support the skills needed for tomorrow.

The future of work will always be hard to predict. But with the right conditions for growth, investment and innovation, we can expand the overall pool of opportunity. It's time for all of us – government, business and society – to align and act together with the intent to deliver on that ambition.

Marco Armitrano is the head of PwC UK

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220 RF
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I8 VT
49 VW
7I W
WBM 2
WC 9
WD 8
WDR 2
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WM 6
WN 6
45 WO
95 WP
88 WR
WS 34
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WT 2
X 6
XJ 40
65 YF
67 YG
20 YM
66 YR

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Jon Yeomans

Who's listening to business when Starmer throws his cards in the air?

Thud, thud, thud. That's not the sound of ministerial heads rolling; it's the sound of bemused bosses slamming their foreheads against their desks at another cabinet reshuffle. This sort of thing was supposed to be very 2019-24. And has it all happened because someone got their conveyancing in a muddle?

Looking at the smoking wreckage of Friday afternoon, it's possible to make two observations. First, this was very much a reorganisation, with faces being tossed around the pack like cards, rather than dropped outright. Second, the business community in particular has reason to feel hard done by.

In the space of a few hours, we were greeted with a new business secretary, housing minister, work and pensions secretary and environment secretary. Meanwhile, we lost the City minister (herself in the post only nine months since the last one became entangled in an overseas legal battle) and the investment minister (whose tenure lasted less than a year).

"I'm just a bit sad for Johnny," said one City grandee. Jonathan Reynolds, that is, the outgoing business secretary lauded as a likeable chap who'd made the effort to listen to firms after Rachel Reeves and the Treasury nuked employers with her national insurance-hiking budget. Many were stunned by the abruptness of his departure. So, one assumes, was Reynolds himself; he was supposed to be going on a trade mission to China this week.

Reynolds, now chief whip, ushered in Labour's industrial strategy to polite applause, though the man on the street, and indeed many readers, may be hard pressed now to recall what it is about.

He was proactive in supporting industry, though one might argue his interventions lacked strategic coherence. Propping up British Steel and Liberty while letting Grangemouth and most of our bioethanol industry fold seems to have had more to do with the potential job losses than deep thinking about the type of industry we want long term.

Resigned: Poppy Gustafsson

To his credit, Reynolds was alive to the protests of the car industry and intervened to water down the impossible-to-hit sales quotas for zero-emission vehicles when the Department for Transport, which "owns" the policy, had taken its eye off the ball.

Critics will say his replacement, the former science minister Peter Kyle, is yet another business secretary who has never worked in business. Westminster gossip has it that, upon being offered the job last week, Kyle – something of a casual dresser – was asked by the PM: "Do you own a suit?" Yet Kyle is smart and energetic and is likely to give firms a sympathetic hearing; he set up a call with business leaders yesterday. He got his start at The Body Shop, where he was mentored by Anita Roddick, having left school at 16 with no qualifications.

The bigger problem for any business secretary is that all the real decisions are driven by the Treasury; one suspects Reynolds would have indulged his interventionist instincts further if not for Reeves's mandarins.

Meanwhile, there are St George's flags appearing on our high streets, and companies that have spent months, even years, getting to know the Labour front bench are wondering whether they'll have to send representatives to Reform's party conference next year.

It's hard to see how business should feel particularly reassured by any of this upheaval.

There are hopes that the much-hated workers' rights bill will be watered down with the departure of Angela Rayner, its driving force. One senior executive dealing with government over the bill described last week how many meetings were punctuated with the phrase "but Angela ...", as if anticipating the deputy PM's inevitable objections. The bill is due to return to the Commons this month. Others have expressed qualified support for Rayner's planning reforms, also working their way through the system.

Then there's the upcoming investment summit in Birmingham, after the loss of Baroness (Poppy) Gustafsson – the former Darktrace chief executive – as investment minister. Despite the rapid appointment of Jason Stockwood as her replacement, there's still plenty of catching up to be done.

Sadly, it feels par for the course for a government that talks a good game on business but fumbles the delivery. Perhaps it doesn't matter who in government is talking to business if the prime minister isn't really listening.

A new approach to Thames Water

Have the odds on a special administration regime (SAR) for Thames Water lengthened? The Treasury is known to be desperate to avoid a costly renationalisation and Reeves wants a "market-based solution" – music to the ears of the creditor group trying to buy the stricken company. Steve Reed, the environment secretary until last week, was thought to be more sympathetic to an SAR, but he has moved to housing.

His replacement, Emma Reynolds, is the former City minister and economic secretary to the Treasury. Prior to that, she spent five years as a lobbyist for TheCityUK. Not only will she bring Treasury thinking to the Thames conundrum, she is far more likely to be on the creditors' wavelength.

The perils of mega deals

Kraft Heinz is to split a decade after its merger. It is a reminder mega deals are so often fraught with peril. The Harvard Business Review once said 70 per cent of such mergers end in failure. "Failing to understand where the value resides in what's been bought, and therefore integrating incorrectly, has caused some of the biggest disasters in acquisitions history," its authors wrote in 2011.

At least Kraft Heinz made it to double figures. Daimler Chrysler split after nine years, while Quaker Oats and Snapple broke up after 27 months. Ten years is equivalent to the tenure of about 12 UK housing ministers. So, almost an epoch.
jon.yeomans@sundaytimes.co.uk

How Rachel Reeves hopes to win over her doubters

David Smith Economic Outlook

It has been quite a few days. Amid plenty of other political comings and goings, a new team is in place in Downing Street, with a focus on the economy, and Rachel Reeves has announced the budget date: a distant Wednesday, November 26. I would not claim responsibility but I did remind the Treasury that meteorological autumn ends on November 30, so you can't have an autumn budget in December.

For the chancellor, it has been a tough "back to school" week, with yields on long-dated government bonds (gilts) briefly reaching a new 27-year high, and suggestions that Downing Street's new signings during the political transfer window have undermined her position.

On the plus side, growth has held up during this quarter and the composite purchasing managers' index (PMI), covering services and manufacturing, provided a pleasant surprise by hitting a 12-month high last month.

There was also good news from the Treasury's Debt Management Office, which has the job of selling government debt to investors. It successfully completed the £14 billion launch of its new 4.75 per cent October 2035 gilt, with strong demand from domestic and international investors for what it described as "the largest-ever gilt issuance" in its history. You know you are in trouble when there is a buyers' strike for gilts, but we appear to be a long way away from that.

Even so, the government is not out of the woods. Some people winced at the prospect of a long run-in to the budget, which might only mean further waves of speculation about which taxes might go up. Such speculation dominated the August "silly season".

It's early days, and the Treasury awaits the first assessment from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). But while nobody seriously disputes that taxes are going up, officials are sticking to the position that last October's announcement from the chancellor was the big tax-raising budget, and this will not be on that scale. We shall see.

As for Downing Street's new signings – the former Bank of England deputy governor Baroness (Minouche) Shafik and former Treasury chief secretary Darren Jones, poached from under the chancellor's nose to be, respectively, chief economic adviser and chief secretary to the prime minister – the Treasury insists Reeves has no problem with these appointments, or a beefed-up Downing Street economic operation. Torsten Bell, a pensions minister and former head of the Resolution Foundation think tank, has also been drafted in to help prepare the budget.

There is a lot of a talent there, though I am not sure any of it is properly tapped into the concerns of financial markets, households and businesses. There is a danger that the discussion, and the decisions, will be over people's heads.

It would not be appropriate for a Downing Street adviser to be leaning on the Bank of England, unlike in America, where Donald Trump leans on the Federal Reserve nearly every day. But an important decision is looming for Shafik's former Bank colleagues.

> **The chancellor has four sets of people to convince she's on the right track before the budget**

Andrew Bailey, the governor, has conceded that bond market turmoil will affect the Bank's decision, to be announced on September 18, on how much quantitative tightening (QT) to do over the coming 12 months. Quantitative easing (QE) was when the Bank bought gilts to boost the economy when it had run out of room to cut interest rates, and QT is the opposite process.

Over the past two years, the Bank has reduced the size of its balance sheet by £100 billion a year through QT. Even before the latest turmoil, markets expected a drop to £75 billion-£80 billion to be announced later this month.

The Bank could and should go further. The most helpful thing would be to end all "active" sales of gilts over the next 12 months and persist with a passive reduction, allowing gilts in its portfolio to run off without replacement when they mature. Such a move would cut QT to about £50 billion and ease some of the pressures that have pushed up gilt yields. Markets would be pleasantly surprised. If that is what the Bank can do, what about Reeves, in the 11 weeks or so between now and the budget? She has four sets of people to convince she's on the right track: the OBR, the gilt market, businesses and households.

The chancellor has already played down talk of a £50 billion black hole that needs filling. Amid speculation that the fiscal watchdog will revise down its medium-term productivity assessment, however, she will seek to stress that government policies, including capital investment, planning reform and trade deals, will raise it.

Among her points for discussion will be that the UK has suffered from a £2 trillion gap in the capital stock compared to America, France, Germany and the Netherlands, which the government is trying to fix. She will also talk about the prize of boosting productivity, and say that gross domestic product (GDP) per capita would be up to £15,000 higher today if productivity had continued to grow at the rate it did before the global financial crisis, and real wages about a third higher.

The process by which one set of economists in the Treasury tries to persuade another, in the OBR, looks odd, but it is how policy is conducted. Officials recall how when Sir Jeremy Hunt was chancellor, he argued that his childcare reforms, which came into effect last week, would boost employment and growth – and the OBR took that on board, increasing his room for manoeuvre. It is just half a mile from the Treasury to the OBR's Petty France offices, but what happens in that small area is rather important.

Also important is what happens in the markets, and whether the chancellor can convince gilts traders that her policies are on track. The Treasury and the Bank are right to say that relentlessly downbeat media attention devoted to the 30-year gilt yield is disproportionate to its importance. They are also right to distinguish the current situation from three years ago and the loss of fiscal control under Liz Truss, when UK gilt yields broke away from the pack and the "moron premium" was established.

Markets are less concerned about the details of the fiscal rules, to which the government says its commitment is "iron clad", but would look askance at tweaks to those rules that would allow more borrowing and debt.

Their concern is about the trajectory of debt and borrowing. The promised post-Covid fix to the public finances has not yet happened. In October last year, in its first forecast under the new government, the OBR predicted public borrowing (the budget deficit) of £127.5 billion for 2024-25, falling to £105.6 billion in 2025-26.

But the 2024-25 deficit came in much higher at £148.3 billion, and markets are sceptical about whether the OBR's latest forecast, in March, of £117.7 billion for this year can come close to being achieved. Progress is needed, or the UK looks like being stuck with a deficit of about 5 per cent of GDP and rising debt.

What can the chancellor do to convince markets? An announcement to review the future of the triple lock on pensions, as recommended by the International Monetary Fund, would help, as would a pledge to consider extending the VAT base.

Official estimates show that zero rating and VAT exemptions cost the government many tens of billions a year in lost revenue, with the biggest contributors being the zero rating of food, which cost £25.6 billion last year, and new housing at £15.9 billion.

The chancellor also has other relations to repair, however, with households and businesses. The markets may crave tough medicine, but those groups generally do not.

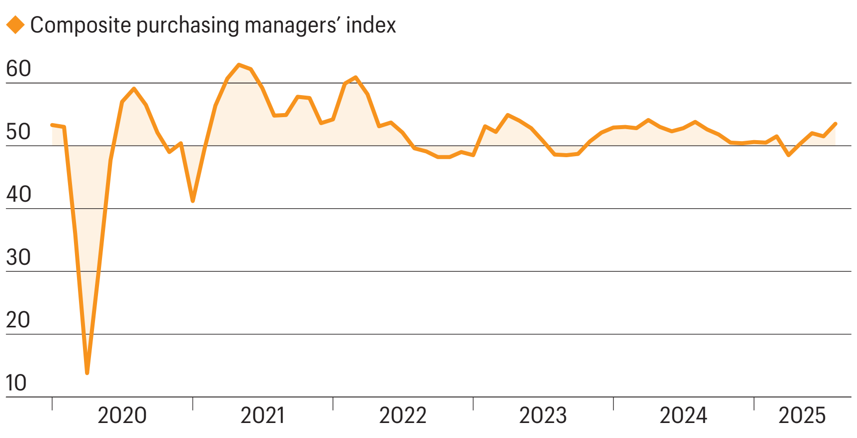
PS

I write quite a lot about horse-trading in this job, but it is a long time since I have been somewhere where they really do trade horses. I did last week. A cousin of mine was selling one at a horse sale in mid Wales, and I went along.

To a townie like me, it was striking that you can pick up a beautiful horse for less than the price of the least reliable second-hand car. Sadly, I do not have anywhere to put one.

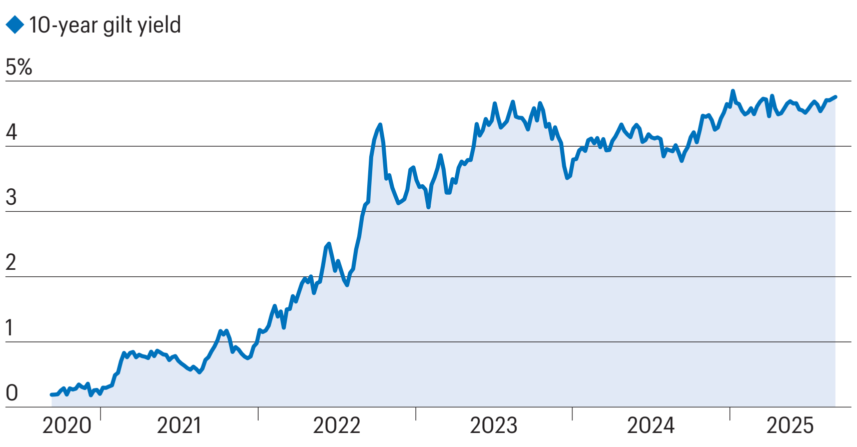
One thing that stood out was the use of the guinea in horse sales, a tradition dating back to the 17th century. A guinea was 21 shillings in pre-decimal currency, £1.05 now. So a horse sold for 1,500 guineas, as some were, is £1,575. Traditionally, the seller gets £1,500 and the £75 goes to the auctioneer.
david.smith@sunday-times.co.uk

GROWTH APPEARS TO BE HOLDING UP ...



Levels above 50 indicate growth. Source: S&P Global

... THOUGH BORROWING COSTS ARE A WORRY



Source: tradingeconomics.com

A perilous month awaits US markets

Irwin Stelzer American Account

There are two ways we Americans are looking at the world as you read this: near-term and longer-term. Investors are focused on the Federal Reserve board's monetary policy committee decision ten days hence, when they will learn whether it will lower its benchmark interest rate as expected.

Investors' edginess is increased because, historically, markets are at their weakest in September and we might face a government shutdown on October 1. Serious policymakers take a longer view. They want to determine whether he who sowed the wind with claims of untrammelled power has forced us to inherit the whirlwind, and just how much of the America we have known was caught up in that.

First, the next ten days. Data tells a tale of a growing economy, at an annual rate of 3.3 per cent in the second quarter and projected to grow at 4 per cent by chief White House economist, Kevin Hassett. Americans, comforted by the "wealth effect" stemming from rising share and house prices, continue to spend. Hassett reckons that business investment, driven in part by billions spent on AI-related projects, is up by 8 per cent. Factory activity continues to contract and the housing sector is in the doldrums. Still, little in the data cries out for a Fed rate cut to stimulate activity.

But Jerome Powell, the Fed chairman, believes the labour market requires attention. The economy created a piddling 22,000 jobs in August and the unemployment rate ticked up from 4.2 to 4.3 per cent. That would not ordinarily be a worrying level, but it might be artificially low because we have avoided massive lay-offs due to "labour hoarding" – temporary retention of under-employed workers by employers who found it difficult to fill openings after the Covid-19 pandemic.

More people are spending more time looking for more jobs. For the first time in four years there are more jobseekers than job openings. Job-hopping in pursuit of greener pastures has been replaced by "job hugging".

Overhanging the market is AI, unpredictable but surely likely to destroy more jobs than it creates. Employers surveyed by The Wall Street Journal variously describe their plans as "holding down hiring", "less head count", "human-light" and those talking to the Axios news website say "budget conversations are heavy on jobs that won't exist in 18 months".

President Trump, who is predicting the largest boom in job creation the nation has ever seen, said in advance of Friday's release that we will not have "real numbers" for a year.

Powell has indicated he is more worried about the soft jobs market than about an inflation rate that remains a full percentage point above the Fed's 2 per cent target. The Bank's policymakers are assuming the tariff-induced price increases will be one-shot affairs, after which inflation will resume its decline.

So it's to be a cut in the Fed's benchmark interest rate at the policy meeting on September 16-17. Whether the rate cut will be 0.25 or 0.50 percentage points is not certain, but it will surely not be the three full points Trump is demanding.

Second, to the longer term, and the whirlwind. The Supreme Court will rule in October whether Trump has the constitutional authority to levy tariffs without congressional approval. Were it to decide that a 50-year emergency is an oxymoron, "it would be a total disaster for the country .... our country would be completely destroyed, and our military power would be instantly obliterated ... we could be a third-world country", warns Trump.

If the Supremes decide against Trump, he will find "other authorities", as Howard Lutnick, the commerce secretary, describes them, that convey the power to levy tariffs and the economy will display its vaunted resilience. But the whirlwind will sweep up both the domestic economy and America's standing in the world. Americans will be poorer, living behind a tariff wall that "protects" them and domestic companies from more efficient suppliers of goods. Traditional business critics of administrations past will be cowed into silence by a powerful and vindictive government.

> **China is sweeping up trade lost by America as Trump counts his tariffs**

A new Fed, in which Trump says he will "very shortly" have a majority, will elevate "fiscal dominance" to be its lodestone in the hope of minimising the cost of servicing the national debt, prompting investors to demand higher rates to fund mounting deficits.

In China, President Xi will have cemented his country's position as the leader of a hostile coalition now broader than America ever faced, at a time when Trump is antagonising America's allies. Xi's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is sweeping up trade lost by America as Trump counts his tariff proceeds.

The 25 heads of state who attended China's display of military might will add heft to the Brics' efforts to dethrone King Dollar as the world's reserve currency, while investors hunt for alternatives to dollar-denominated assets.

That's the same dollar Trump is so keen to devalue to discourage imports.
irwin@irwinstelzer.com

Irwin Stelzer is a business adviser

Prufrock

William Turvill

Marshall's GB News brag is pure Trump

Sir Paul Marshall, the hedge fund tycoon and budding media titan, has shied away from the limelight since he co-founded GB News four years ago.

Aside from a brief stint as interim chairman, when he tried to rally his troops with a reading of Theodore Roosevelt's *The Man in the Arena* speech, he has preferred to focus on his day job at Marshall Wace.

So it was notable that Marshall, father to Winston, the former Mumford & Sons banjoist, made it to Washington for GB News's US expansion party at Ned's Club. Also in attendance: Nigel Farage, the Reform UK leader/GB News presenter, Dame Helena Morrissey, the City grandee and GB News board member, and George Farmer, another board member who is son to metals trader Lord Farmer and the husband of Candace Owens, the US right-wing influencer.

Marshall praised President Trump in a speech and went on to summon his inner Donald by claiming that "GB News is the No 1 TV news channel" in the UK. While it's true that GB News has claimed a bigger audience than BBC News and Sky News in certain slots, industry figures show they both have larger monthly audiences than GB News – for now.

● Not long ago, sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), typically made from cooking oil, was said to be set to thrust air travel into a greener future. But last week SAF crashed down to earth when Shell, which has been in retreat from green energy under Wael Sawan, its chief executive, announced it was scrapping plans for Europe's biggest biofuels plant. That news plunged the future of green air travel into uncertainty but was not enough to halt Airbus, the planemaker, from launching a video series on the future of aerospace. Episode one, released after the Shell closure, has the title: "What needs to happen to fuel sustainable aviation?" Julie Kitcher, Airbus's chief sustainability officer, plugged the episode, claiming: "Momentum is building … real progress is coming." Hmm.

MIKE B/NICK WOODALL

Breaking news: Sir Paul Marshall and Dame Helena Morrissey at the GB News expansion party in Washington

JUST SAYING …

I think most people are silent because they are afraid of retaliation if they speak up

Ray Dalio, the hedge fund billionaire, suggested that business leaders are afraid to stand up to US president Donald Trump

Richards' film role in question

Tim Richards spent the Nineties working as a Hollywood executive at Warner Bros. Then, against the advice of colleagues, friends and family, he packed it all in to set up the British cinema chain Vue.

Still, as a boss reliant on good films coming out of Los Angeles, he keeps his ear to the California ground.

Naturally, he's been pleased to see Apple and Amazon's movie-making arms embrace theatrical releases of late, but is rather sniffy about Netflix, whose co-chief executive, Ted Sarandos, tends to shy away from the big screen.

"Ted loves being the bad boy," Richards told the Business Leader podcast. "He loves being the disruptor. Notwithstanding the fact that many industrial professionals have pointed out to him that he's leaving hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars on the table by not releasing them theatrically.

"He doesn't care. He's making $50 million a year and loves being that Hollywood disruptor – which he's not." Ouch.

Why Moulding is a City AM hero

It is not every week you turn 20, so Prufrock would like to wish City AM, the Square Mile freesheet newspaper, a happy birthday. To mark the occasion, co-founder Lawson Muncaster agreed to an interview that featured in the paper last week. The outspoken Scot disclosed that his talents include ping-pong and pool. But he was snookered by a demand to name his favourite book. "I don't read, I'm dyslexic," said the newspaperman.

Muncaster was on script when asked who he looked up to. "The people that originally gave me the money to set up City AM," he said, "and now Matt Moulding." Readers may recall that Moulding's company, the online beauty retailer THG, decided to buy City AM out of administration a few years back. A hero indeed.

BESTSELLING BOOKS

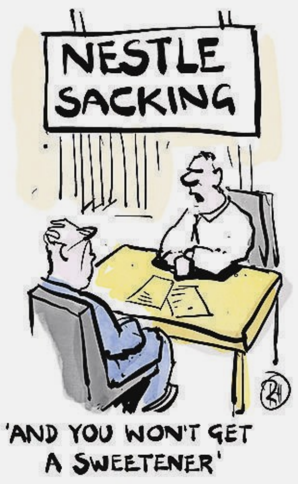
1	**The Let Them Theory** Mel Robbins *Hay House* (19,306)
2	**The Diary of a CEO** Steven Bartlett *Ebury Edge* (12,059)
3	**The Trading Game** Gary Stevenson *Penguin* (8,148)
4	**The Psychology of Money** Morgan Housel *Harriman House* (7,280)
5	**The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck** Mark Manson *Harper* (4,729)
6	**The Shortest History of Economics** Andrew Leigh *Old Street Publishing* (2,425)
7	**Never Split the Difference** Chris Voss & Tahl Raz *Random House Business* (2,419)
8	**Money** David McWilliams *Simon & Schuster* (2,080)
9	**What's Your Dream?** Simon Squibb *Century* (1,617)
10	**Radical Candor** Kim Scott *Pan* (1,475)

Bestseller List prepared by Nielsen using data supplied by and copyright to Nielsen BookScan, taken from the TCM for the four-week period to August 30, 2025

If you want to get ahead, get a hat!

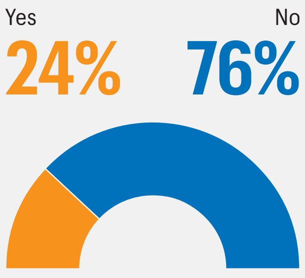
Readers might have noted that Allan Leighton, the veteran who chairs Asda, is often seen in a flat cap. City chatter has it that there might be more to this than meets the eye – that Leighton could own a stake in the unnamed hat designer. For Prufrock, it sounded too good to be true. And, alas, it was. "It's just a rumour," Leighton texted. "Just get given hats all the time." Eh? Why? "I wear them all the time," he said. "You should try it," Leighton told Prufrock. Maybe we will, Allan. Maybe we will.

FUNNY BUSINESS



'AND YOU WON'T GET A SWEETENER'

X POLL



Tesla's board has proposed a new incentive plan that could result in boss Elon Musk landing a $1 trillion payday. Is he worth it? @TimesBusiness

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VIEWPOINT

SEEMA SHAH

Economic watchdog needs a bigger bite

There are several reasons why UK borrowing costs are the highest in 27 years. Some of these are beyond Rachel Reeves's control, but a fundamental issue is that the government lacks economic credibility because of the dire state of public finances.

Restoring this must be the focus of the chancellor's November 26 budget – and changes to fiscal policy alone are unlikely to be sufficient.

Reeves has little room for manoeuvre. I have yet to hear of a credible tax increase that would not cost more in lost growth and tax receipts than it generates in revenue. Last year's decision to increase employers' NI contributions was a spectacular own goal.

The idea of another bank levy has been floated but its consequence would be reduced business lending.

With Labour having tied its hands by pledging not to raise taxes on "working people", its options are limited. Reeves is equally unlikely to countenance deep cuts to public spending. After they caved in to backbenchers on cuts to welfare spending, she and Sir Keir Starmer will not want to risk another U-turn.

There may be an opportunity in taking a leaf out of Blair and Brown's playbook. In 1998 Labour made the Bank of England independent, so ending its use as a political football. This helped to secure a surge of international capital.

Today's government has no equivalent lever in terms of magnitude and impact but, while not a like for like, they should consider applying this blueprint to the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR).

Like the old BoE it is often caught in political crossfire and lacks teeth, curtailing its value as a marker of fiscal credibility.

Although the OBR is independent, it can publish forecasts only when told to do so by the chancellor. Granting it the freedom to publish at any time, especially in response to significant policy shifts, would reduce the risk of fiscal surprises. Similarly requiring its involvement in all major fiscal decisions would build in discipline, while requiring OBR scrutiny of party manifestos before publication would safeguard fiscal sustainability.

Politically this could serve Labour well, providing cover for necessary choices on tax and spending and shining a light on Reform's economically illiterate policy agenda.

A beefier OBR would require a leadership team with gravitas. Fortunately, heavyweights such as Sarah Breeden, Paul Johnson and Andy Haldane could be candidates.

Events in the US also make this an ideal moment. Confidence there is being undermined by concerns around the independence of the Fed and even the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The UK should take the opposite tack, positioning itself as the standard bearer for independent, transparent data underpinning policy.

Seema Shah is chief global strategist at Principal Asset Management

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THE WEEK IN THE MARKETS

FTSE 100

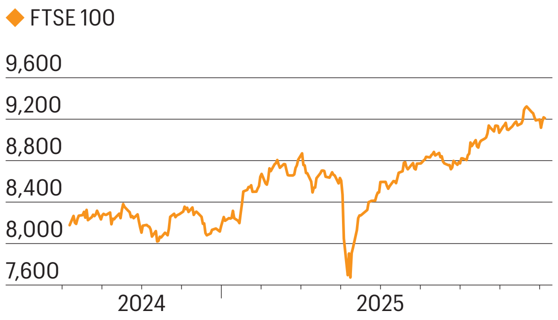
9,208.21

▲ 20.87 ▲ 0.23% **H:** 9,357.51 **L:** 7,544.83

FTSE 250

21,575.54

▼ 30.18 ▼ 0.14% **H:** 22,241.80 **L:** 17,392.49



Source: Factset

RISERS

- **Kainos Group:** 876.5p, ▲ 24%
- **Fresnillo:** £21.18, ▲ 18.5%
- **Hochschild Mining:** 325.6p, ▲ 15.9%
- **Currys:** 128.7p, ▲ 14.6%
- **Alfa Financial Software:** 245p, ▲ 9.96%

FALLERS

- **Ithaca Energy:** 185.6p, ▼ 20%
- **Hilton Food Group:** 690p, ▼ 17%
- **Oxford Nanopore:** 162.1p, ▼ 10.3%
- **Ashmore Group:** 163.6p, ▼ 8.3%
- **Admiral Group:** £33.41, ▼ 7.8%

Source: FactSet

DOW JONES 45,400.86 ▼ 144.02 ▼ 0.32% **H:** 45,770.20 **L:** 36,611.78

NASDAQ 21,700.39 ▲ 244.84 ▲ 1.14% **H:** 21,878.81 **L:** 14,784.03

S&P 500 6,481.50 ▲ 21.24 ▲ 0.33% **H:** 6,532.65 **L:** 4,835.04

NIKKEI 43,018.75 ▲ 300.28 ▲ 0.70% **H:** 43,876.42 **L:** 30,792.74

HANG SENG 25,417.98 ▲ 340.36 ▲ 1.36% **H:** 25,918.86 **L:** 16,964.28

SHANGHAI 3,812.51 ▼ 45.42 ▼ 1.18% **H:** 3,888.60 **L:** 2,689.70

CAC 40 7,674.78 ▼ 29.12 ▼ 0.38% **H:** 8,257.88 **L:** 6,763.76

DAX 23,596.98 ▼ 305.23 ▼ 1.28% **H:** 24,639.10 **L:** 18,208.84

FTSE EUROFIRST 2,180.11 ▼ 1.87 ▼ 0.09% **H:** 2,194.55 **L:** 1,016.04

SENSEX 80,710.76 ▲ 901.11 ▲ 1.13% **H:** 85,978.25 **L:** 71,425.01

ALL ORDS 9,140.50 ▼ 102.50 ▼ 1.11% **H:** 9,322.10 **L:** 7,343.70

S&P TSX 29,050.63 ▲ 486.18 ▲ 1.70% **H:** 29,115.42 **L:** 22,227.74

DOLLAR
USD > GBP
$1.3510
▲ 0.0005
12-month high: $1.3790
low: $1.2100

EURO
EUR > GBP
€1.1525
▼ 0.0033
12-month high: €1.2444
low: €1.1411

YEN
YEN > USD
¥147.07
▲ 0.02
12-month high: ¥158.86
low: ¥139.58

OIL
DOLLARS/BARREL
$65.41
▼ 2.05
12-month high: $82.63
low: $58.40

GOLD
DOLLARS/TROY OZ
$3,592.84
▲ 76.44
12-month high: $3,592.84
low: $2,502.70

BITCOIN
DOLLARS
$110,780
▲ 2,200
12-month high: $124,496
low: $52,605
Price at 12.45pm Saturday

THE ECONOMY

Consumer prices index		current rate **3.8%**	prev. month **3.6%**
CPI including housing		current rate **4.2%**	prev. month **4.1%**
Retail price index		current rate **4.8%**	prev. month **4.4%**
Average weekly earnings	**£724**	on prev. month ▲ **0.1%**	on last year ▲ **4.7%**
Unemployment	**1.67m**	current rate **4.7%**	prev. month **4.7%**
Manufacturing output		on the year ▲ **0.3%**	on last month ▼ **1.0%**
Retail sales		on the year ▲ **1.1%**	on last month ▲ **0.6%**
UK trade balance (£bn)	latest 3 mths **-9.19**	prev. 3 mths **-7.47**	latest 12 mths **-32.84**
Gross domestic product	latest quarter ▲ **0.3%**	prev. quarter ▲ **0.7%**	annual change ▲ **1.2%**
Budget deficit (PSNB) in £bn-	last month **-1.1**	prev. month **-22.6**	year to date **-60.0**

10-YEAR BOND YIELDS %

		variation	12 months high	low
UK	4.654	▼ 0.070	4.909	3.729
US	4.085	▼ 0.148	4.817	3.597
JAPAN	1.576	▼ 0.029	1.640	0.797
GERMANY	2.670	▼ 0.057	2.945	2.013

TOP 200 COMPANIES

Market cap ranking ▼		Price	Change on week	52-week high	52-week low	Mkt Cap (£m)
105	**Aberdeen**	187.2	-7.5	206.8	120.8	3445.9
48	**Admiral**	3342.0	-284.0	3686.0	2383.0	10236.7
52	**Airtel Africa**	221.2	-0.6	225.4	93.0	8071.2
151	**AJ Bell**	504.5	-5.0	558.5	355.2	2045.0
81	**Alliance Witan**	1248.0	-10.0	1330.0	998.8	4894.1
172	**Allianz Technology Trust**	460.5	nc	478.0	281.4	1707.4
167	**Alpha Group International**	4180.0	+5.0	4215.0	1975.0	1768.3
27	**Anglo American**	2277.0	-1.0	2999.8	1900.0	26824.2
32	**Antofagasta**	2133.0	-12.0	2214.0	1278.0	21028.3
30	**Ashtead**	5538.0	+92.0	6448.0	3477.0	23473.3
37	**Associated British Foods**	2222.0	+62.0	2440.0	1818.9	15906.5
1	**AstraZeneca**	12090.0	+300.0	13074.0	9573.5	187479.0
63	**Auto Trader**	803.8	+0.6	920.0	706.0	7008.4
34	**Aviva**	656.4	+4.8	692.6	450.9	20066.5
76	**Babcock International**	1091.0	+75.0	1177.0	455.4	5492.0
11	**BAE Systems**	1777.0	+19.5	1998.5	1127.0	53421.5
118	**Balfour Beatty**	604.5	+11.0	609.5	365.8	3004.1
182	**Baltic Classifieds**	327.0	-3.0	403.0	271.0	1580.6
13	**Barclays**	361.0	+0.6	379.4	213.9	50698.2
79	**Barratt Redrow**	367.9	+8.2	519.6	347.6	5278.7
83	**Beazley**	785.5	+2.0	983.5	727.8	4798.8
120	**Bellway**	2348.0	+18.0	3384.0	2134.0	2785.2
100	**Berkeley**	3690.0	+90.0	5202.6	3462.0	3532.3
165	**Big Yellow Group**	925.0	+15.0	1344.0	829.0	1820.1
135	**B&M European Value Retail**	240.0	-0.8	446.0	216.4	2412.1
7	**BP**	415.6	-16.5	472.2	329.2	65607.6
125	**Bridgepoint**	328.0	-8.8	410.0	229.2	2706.6
6	**British American Tobacco**	4133.0	-52.0	4401.0	2621.8	90503.0
108	**British Land**	336.6	+1.2	467.8	318.6	3365.2
33	**BT**	204.8	-11.8	223.6	131.0	20403.4
51	**Bunzl**	2588.0	+86.0	3732.0	2210.0	8451.4
90	**Burberry**	1227.0	-56.5	1375.0	555.6	4407.1
155	**Caledonia Investments**	383.0	+17.0	393.5	321.5	2011.6
95	**Carnival**	2136.0	-24.0	2206.0	1054.0	4026.0
58	**Centrica**	154.5	-6.5	169.6	113.0	7390.1
190	**Chemring**	540.0	+3.0	604.0	297.5	1469.9
133	**City of London Inv Trust**	496.0	-2.5	512.0	382.2	2457.5
189	**Coats Group**	77.0	+0.2	104.2	64.8	1476.4
25	**Coca-Cola Europacific**	6540.0	-50.0	7560.0	4883.8	30135.1
41	**Coca-Cola HBC AG**	3780.0	+44.0	4102.0	2620.0	13740.6
17	**Compass**	2557.0	+45.0	2853.0	2344.0	43403.3
134	**Computacenter**	2298.0	-2.0	2724.0	2020.0	2441.5
82	**ConvaTec**	239.0	+2.4	311.2	211.8	4871.8
121	**Cranswick**	5130.0	+30.0	5590.0	4555.0	2783.8
106	**Croda International**	2465.0	-43.0	4335.0	2426.8	3442.0
191	**Currys**	128.8	+16.4	136.2	74.9	1457.8
85	**DCC**	4756.0	+52.0	5865.0	4452.0	4618.1
126	**Deliveroo**	179.0	+0.5	179.2	111.6	2680.4
160	**Derwent London**	1676.0	-24.0	2530.0	1635.0	1882.0
16	**Diageo**	2034.0	-15.0	2677.0	1797.0	45264.2
60	**Diploma**	5405.0	+5.0	5625.0	3532.0	7252.2
144	**Drax**	652.5	+2.5	727.0	534.5	2263.8
131	**Dunelm**	1225.0	+25.0	1273.0	836.6	2466.0
99	**Easyet**	469.8	-19.8	594.0	401.0	3561.1
66	**Endeavour Mining**	2754.0	+218.0	2768.0	1387.0	6650.0
178	**Energean**	892.5	-62.0	1111.8	720.5	1644.7
74	**Entain**	864.4	-13.6	1031.5	452.5	5528.2
21	**Experian**	3921.0	+89.0	4101.0	3049.0	35987.7
75	**F&C Investment Trust**	1154.0	-9.0	1202.6	900.8	5527.2
188	**Fidelity China Special Sits**	302.5	-3.5	310.2	170.6	1477.3
179	**Fidelity European Trust**	404.5	+0.5	416.4	326.0	1633.5
115	**Frasers Group**	693.0	+17.0	903.0	534.0	3120.7
38	**Fresnillo**	2118.0	+330.0	2144.0	502.0	15607.4
80	**Games Workshop**	15340.0	-110.0	16750.0	9930.0	5057.9
166	**Genus**	2685.0	+80.0	3228.8	1424.0	1773.1
22	**Glencore**	286.9	-5.2	438.8	205.0	34107.5
171	**Grafton**	885.2	+11.1	1094.0	790.9	1717.1
195	**Grainger**	191.2	-3.0	252.5	184.4	1418.0
137	**Greencoat UK Wind**	108.9	-0.2	144.6	99.5	2390.3
175	**Greggs**	1637.0	+60.0	3250.0	1499.0	1673.9
9	**GSK**	1476.0	+23.5	1678.6	1242.5	60072.4
23	**Haleon**	365.8	+2.8	419.5	346.1	32736.5
45	**Halma**	3242.0	-46.0	3344.6	2316.0	12308.1
192	**Hammerson**	274.2	-12.8	331.0	219.2	1455.3
112	**Harbour Energy**	224.2	-3.8	297.2	146.4	3217.4
152	**HarbourVest**	2800.0	+45.0	2850.0	2136.0	2038.6
196	**Helios Towers**	133.2	+2.0	136.2	87.2	1405.9
141	**HG Capital Trust**	498.0	-4.0	550.0	420.0	2279.5
139	**HICL Infrastructure**	121.2	+1.4	133.8	103.8	2347.3
98	**Hikma Pharmaceuticals**	1720.0	-65.0	2360.0	1690.0	3816.4
170	**Hill & Smith**	2140.0	+25.0	2255.0	1464.0	1719.6
92	**Hiscox**	1284.0	-21.0	1454.0	1008.0	4299.0
174	**Hochschild Mining**	325.6	+44.6	338.4	158.6	1675.1
87	**Howden Joinery**	836.5	-0.5	982.5	647.1	4538.9
2	**HSBC Holdings**	963.0	+16.2	981.8	645.5	166816.0
70	**ICG**	2150.0	-32.0	2468.0	1539.0	6248.7
97	**IG Group Holdings**	1138.0	+8.0	1158.0	860.0	3964.2
73	**IMI**	2260.0	-14.0	2330.0	1556.0	5582.2
28	**Imperial Brands**	3144.0	+22.0	3180.0	2139.0	25375.0
130	**Inchcape**	673.0	+5.5	855.5	575.0	2480.4
46	**Informa**	890.2	+19.8	911.6	634.2	11560.8
40	**InterContinental Hotels**	9088.0	+136.0	10975.0	7252.0	13945.8
36	**International Cons Airlines**	390.8	+8.6	396.8	182.8	18066.8
145	**Int'l Public Partnerships**	122.0	+1.8	134.2	105.2	2237.2
153	**International Workplace**	201.2	-1.2	233.8	146.0	2020.1
59	**Intertek**	4696.0	+6.0	5575.0	4044.0	7318.8
102	**Investec**	545.5	+4.5	627.5	390.0	3519.4
117	**Ithaca Energy**	185.6	-46.4	238.0	94.4	3069.3
116	**ITV**	82.5	+1.0	88.9	61.2	3100.5
84	**JD Sports Fashion**	94.5	-1.5	162.1	61.0	4781.0
111	**Johnson Matthey**	1919.0	+8.0	1942.0	1131.0	3225.0
162	**JP Morgan American IT**	1070.0	-2.0	1198.0	827.0	1870.1
110	**JPM Global Growth & Income**	559.0	-5.0	614.0	441.5	3232.3
156	**JTC**	1168.0	+14.0	1186.0	751.0	2009.0
146	**Just Group**	211.5	+0.5	214.5	115.0	2196.9
89	**Kingfisher**	253.2	-4.2	333.5	227.2	4425.1
193	**Lancashire Holdings**	592.0	-19.0	721.0	505.0	1444.5
96	**Land Securities**	539.5	-14.5	682.0	490.2	4019.2
199	**Law Debenture**	998.0	+8.0	1028.0	737.1	1336.2
42	**Legal & General**	234.9	-12.6	266.2	206.8	13381.6
114	**Lion Finance**	7150.0	-180.0	8100.0	3540.2	3130.7
15	**Lloyds Banking**	79.4	-0.1	84.6	52.4	47143.7
93	**LondonMetric Property**	180.6	-3.6	210.4	167.1	4231.3
14	**London Stock Exchange**	9270.0	+102.0	12185.0	9050.0	48659.1
164	**Man Group**	159.0	-4.5	222.2	150.4	1844.0
62	**Marks & Spencer**	342.2	-3.2	417.8	319.2	7039.2
54	**Melrose Industries**	616.0	+28.0	707.2	376.0	7795.8
168	**Mercantile Inv Trust**	247.0	-1.0	259.0	195.0	1765.2
69	**M&G**	260.6	-4.5	279.0	171.5	6267.3
184	**Mitchells & Butlers**	258.0	+0.5	310.0	194.4	1545.1
161	**Mitie**	139.4	-0.6	160.0	101.0	1873.5
88	**Mondi**	1012.0	-29.5	1477.5	973.8	4467.1
132	**Monks Investment Trust**	1400.0	-18.0	1426.0	984.0	2458.9
157	**Morgan Sindall**	4175.0	nc	4875.0	2805.0	2004.8
169	**Murray Int'l Trust (Ord)**	297.5	+3.5	301.5	219.0	1760.1
12	**National Grid**	1034.0	-7.0	1103.5	909.8	51300.0
18	**NatWest**	506.0	-4.6	565.6	325.8	40790.7
39	**Next**	12200.0	+245.0	13100.0	9028.0	14950.4
127	**Ocado**	312.4	-24.2	411.0	222.1	2617.5
159	**OSB**	535.5	+8.0	574.5	343.6	1935.4
183	**Oxford Nanopore**	162.1	-18.8	224.8	88.6	1561.3
187	**Pantheon International**	335.0	+6.0	344.0	262.0	1479.0
173	**Paragon Banking**	864.5	-4.5	981.0	650.5	1686.0
64	**Pearson**	1045.5	-31.5	1401.0	1010.0	6745.2
147	**Pennon**	465.4	-8.2	549.5	371.1	2196.6
53	**Pershing Square Holdings**	4420.0	+106.0	4557.5	3068.0	7881.7
101	**Persimmon**	1100.0	+37.0	1721.8	1030.5	3524.3
180	**Personal Assets Trust**	523.0	+9.0	526.0	486.0	1627.5
129	**Petershill Partners**	236.0	-2.0	286.5	196.6	2552.8
65	**Phoenix Group Holdings**	670.0	-11.5	699.5	475.2	6725.2
148	**Plus500**	3086.0	+54.0	3492.0	2304.0	2175.4
86	**Polar Capital Tech Trust**	397.0	-1.0	412.0	235.0	4547.7
181	**Premier Foods**	187.0	-1.6	216.5	168.8	1624.7
142	**Primary Health Properties**	90.0	-2.0	105.5	85.4	2272.8
29	**Prudential**	975.6	-13.0	1011.5	594.8	25077.2
128	**Qinetiq**	478.0	+2.2	579.5	337.4	2580.7
149	**Quilter**	154.4	-9.6	173.2	119.8	2167.9
176	**Rathbones**	1790.0	-50.0	1970.0	1374.0	1666.9
19	**Reckitt Benckiser**	5710.0	+180.0	5722.0	4460.0	38661.9
8	**RELX**	3482.0	+36.0	4205.0	3369.0	63788.4
163	**Renewables Infrastructure**	77.2	nc	106.6	70.0	1855.8
138	**Renishaw**	3245.0	+15.0	3865.0	2100.0	2362.0
49	**Rentokil Initial**	377.1	+12.1	478.8	306.0	9525.7
72	**Rightmove**	741.6	-1.6	827.0	585.8	5734.1
10	**Rio Tinto**	4681.0	+39.0	5474.0	4024.5	58707.1
123	**RIT Capital Partners**	1958.0	-2.0	2030.0	1672.2	2743.4
5	**Rolls-Royce Holdings**	1075.5	+5.5	1111.5	461.2	90668.8
119	**Rotork**	346.8	+2.6	354.8	266.8	2894.8
124	**RS Group**	572.0	+7.0	850.0	476.8	2711.6
197	**Safestore Holdings**	633.0	+4.0	930.0	525.5	1383.0
47	**Sage**	1085.0	-1.5	1349.0	960.0	10450.0
61	**Sainsbury's**	312.6	+13.2	312.6	223.4	7164.5
200	**Savills**	909.0	-1.0	1210.0	858.9	1314.4
71	**Schroders**	367.8	-12.2	428.8	283.4	5924.2
43	**Scottish Mortgage**	1091.5	-6.5	1142.5	778.1	12363.8
50	**Segro**	627.8	+0.8	913.4	586.9	8497.2
143	**Serco**	222.6	+4.2	232.6	136.2	2268.2
56	**Severn Trent**	2554.0	-32.0	2807.0	2323.0	7688.3
122	**Shaftesbury Capital**	141.5	-4.5	162.9	111.6	2763.8
3	**Shell**	2627.5	-96.5	2843.0	2269.9	153383.0
185	**Sirius Real Estate**	98.4	-3.2	107.0	72.6	1489.0
44	**Smith & Nephew**	1416.0	+33.0	1426.5	911.0	12311.8
55	**Smiths**	2356.0	nc	2384.0	1514.6	7725.0
177	**Smithson Investment Trust**	1492.0	-8.0	1575.0	1224.0	1658.6
113	**Softcat**	1599.0	-13.0	1960.0	1427.0	3197.1
94	**Spectris**	4078.0	+32.0	4170.0	1877.0	4051.1
78	**Spirax**	7195.0	-100.0	8245.0	5380.0	5296.4
35	**SSE**	1651.5	-78.5	2019.0	1446.9	18274.7
24	**Standard Chartered**	1366.0	-20.0	1433.0	746.8	31465.5
68	**St. James's Place**	1213.5	-55.5	1366.5	697.0	6444.5
140	**Tate & Lyle**	512.0	-19.5	848.5	460.4	2280.7
103	**Taylor Wimpey**	98.9	+3.1	169.1	92.5	3500.3
136	**TBC Bank**	4295.0	-80.0	5070.0	2450.0	2409.5
186	**Telecom Plus**	1850.0	+40.0	2100.0	1580.0	1481.1
158	**Templeton Emerging Mkts**	202.0	+2.4	202.5	148.2	1972.4
26	**Tesco**	441.0	+18.2	442.6	310.2	28786.1
20	**3i Group**	3922.0	-97.0	4403.8	3057.1	38177.3
109	**3i Infrastructure**	355.0	+14.0	363.0	296.0	3274.3
150	**TP Icap**	279.5	+2.0	315.0	217.0	2095.4
107	**Tritax Big Box REIT**	136.8	-2.0	166.8	121.9	3393.6
4	**Unilever**	4769.0	+117.0	5034.0	4311.0	116930.0
57	**United Utilities**	1124.0	-26.0	1183.5	928.0	7664.4
104	**Unite**	707.5	+9.5	1003.0	672.5	3462.4
154	**Vistry**	622.6	+11.8	1436.0	486.8	2014.9
31	**Vodafone**	87.9	-0.5	89.8	62.4	21166.4
67	**Weir**	2532.0	+68.0	2710.6	1875.0	6573.4
77	**Whitbread**	3103.0	-42.0	3352.0	2253.0	5382.6
198	**Wizz Air Holdings**	1314.0	-44.0	1818.0	970.5	1358.8
194	**Worldwide Healthcare Trust**	340.5	+9.0	362.2	256.5	1423.5
91	**WPP**	398.8	+7.9	903.0	358.9	4302.3

52-week highs and lows are intra-day figures, not end of day. Excludes exchange-traded funds. nc = no change. — = not applicable.

Source: ICE Data Services

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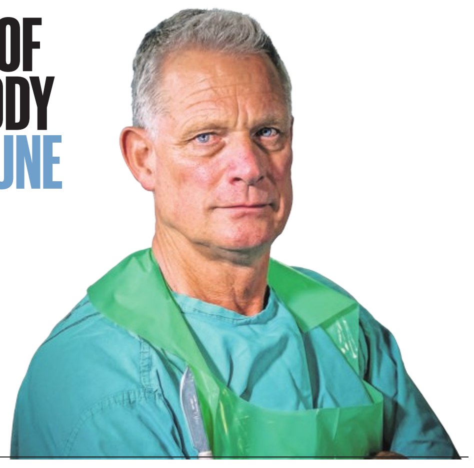
I FOUND £500K OF COCAINE IN A BODY
FAME AND FORTUNE PAGE 14



How using a trust can really backfire

As Angela Rayner has learnt, putting property or other assets in a trust will not always protect you from the taxman. Here's how to do it right, says *Rachel Mortimer*

ILLUSTRATION BY RUSSEL HERNEMAN

Contrary to their reputation, trusts are not just a tax-free ticket for the super-rich. In fact, it is the moderately wealthy who can best use them to shield their assets if they know how to navigate the rules.

Interest in trusts has boomed since it was announced last year that most pension pots will be included in an estate for inheritance tax purposes from April 2027. Lawyers and accountants say that their clients are nervous of a further raid on their estates by the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, in the budget on November 26.

Rachael Griffin, the head of tax and trusts at the wealth manager Quilter, said: "Every other call we get is from clients who were not concerned about inheritance tax, but now very much are, especially in light of the pension changes. And trusts are featuring early on in those discussions."

When used correctly, putting assets in a trust can reduce an inheritance tax bill, or avoid one altogether; can make provision for family members and help with estate planning, particularly for families with complicated affairs.

But trusts are not foolproof. They can backfire and lead to a surprise tax bill – a painful lesson learnt by Angela Rayner, the former deputy prime minister, over the past few days. If you are considering setting up a trust, here's what you need to know.

WHAT IS A TRUST?

There were 733,000 active trusts and estates listed with the Trust Registration Service, an official record of most trusts in the UK, in August 2024. This was up from 633,000 the year before and does not include the influx of registrations that lawyers say was triggered by the budget in October.

There are two main types of trust: bare and discretionary. The most common use of a bare trust is to give away assets to a child or grandchild – the trustee looks after the asset on behalf of the beneficiary, who gets full control of it once they turn 18 (or 16 in Scotland).

This is the most straightforward type of trust, but also the least flexible. The person making the gift, known as the benefactor, cannot change their mind about giving the asset away or who gets it once the trust has been established and this can cause problems if there is a family fallout.

Benefactors who want to maintain an element of control over the asset would be better suited to a discretionary trust. They do not need to specify a beneficiary when creating the trust and the trustees – appointed to run the trust – have discretion to allocate the assets.

A benefactor can also be a trustee and adjustments can be made to protect the assets in the event that family circumstances change, for example if a beneficiary marries, divorces or faces bankruptcy.

James Quarmby from the law firm Stephenson Harwood said: "Most trusts do not have professional trustees. Generally when you go to a solicitor to set one up they will recommend parents or grandparents as a trustee, which helps to keep costs down."

Trusts can also help to reduce any inheritance tax due on an estate. If correctly placed in a trust, assets no longer belong to a benefactor and so are not part of the estate that will be subject to inheritance tax when they die.

They can help to bring the value of an estate below crucial inheritance tax thresholds – everyone gets a £325,000 tax-free allowance and another £175,000 allowance if passing a main home on to a direct descendant on an estate worth less than £2 million.

Anything left to a spouse or civil partner is inheritance tax-free and couples can also inherit each other's allowances, meaning that between them they could pass on up to £1 million tax-free.

HOW IT CAN GO WRONG

Trusts can be used as a way of protecting assets for family members, particularly those who may face difficulties looking after their finances.

But the rules are incredibly complex. Angela Rayner, who resigned from the government on Friday, underpaid stamp duty because she misunderstood the rules of a trust set up for her son.

In January she had sold her stake in the family home in Ashton-under-Lyne, Greater Manchester, to the trust set up for his benefit. She used the money to buy an £800,000 flat in Hove, East Sussex, and did not pay the second home stamp duty surcharge, because she thought she no longer owned any part of the family home.

However, if children are minors and the beneficiaries of the trust (and any property held in it), the parent retains an interest in the property for tax purposes. It is thought that Rayner may now have to pay £40,000 extra stamp duty, and possible HMRC penalties.

Trusts can also be used to pass on property in such a way as to give someone other than the beneficiary the right to live there – for example, if someone wanted to leave their half of a home to children from a previous relationship, while also allowing the partner who owns the other half to stay in the property.

A "right to reside" clause written into a will would give the partner the right to live there during their lifetime, and the deceased's share would be left in trust for the children.

But if the aim of putting a home in trust is to avoid or reduce inheritance tax, then the rules are strict on who can still benefit from the property once it has been transferred.

For assets to be considered by HM Revenue & Customs as being outside a donor's estate for inheritance tax purposes, the donor cannot get any benefit from them once they have been given away. So you cannot transfer your home into a trust and continue to live there rent-free, or earn rent from it. This would be seen as a "gift with reservation" by the taxman and it would be included in your estate for inheritance tax purposes when you died.

One workaround would be for you to pay the trustees a market rent, and prove to HMRC that the rent was fair and regularly reviewed. "The trustees could have to pay income tax on that rental income too," Quarmby said.

> **Many see setting one up as a paper exercise, but it's absolutely not. There are lots of complex rules**

THE INHERITANCE TAX RISKS

There is a common misconception that transferring assets into a trust means they are always inheritance tax-free, but there could still be a bill to pay.

Griffin said: "Many people see setting up a trust as a paper exercise, but it's absolutely not. There are lots of complex rules that need to be followed."

Assets in a discretionary trust can remain there for 125 years after its creation and are not part of anyone's estate during that time.

HMRC counters this considerable benefit by immediately charging inheritance tax at 20 per cent on any assets put into a discretionary trust above the £325,000 tax-free allowance. A further charge of up to 6 per cent is levied every ten years on the value of everything in the trust above the allowance.

If you put no more than £325,000 into a trust in a seven-year period you will avoid HMRC's charges – a couple can transfer £650,000.

And after seven years the allowance resets and another £325,000 each can be transferred into the trust free of tax.

If a benefactor dies within seven years of putting assets in a discretionary trust, however, then inheritance tax of up to 40 per cent will apply on anything above the allowances. "Because of these limits, creating a trust is not a tax-free solution for the very wealthiest, but rather the moderately wealthy," Quarmby said.

THE CGT RISK

Capital gains tax is levied on the profits made from the sale of property (other than your main home), businesses, shares and most possessions worth £6,000 or more. It is charged at 18 per cent for basic-rate taxpayers and 24 per cent for higher and additional-rate taxpayers.

Assets that are given away outside a trust are treated as if they were sold at market value for CGT purposes and tax may be due – even though the person giving them has not received a profit themselves. Say you bought a £10,000 painting and gave it to your son ten years later when it was worth £15,000. Your gain for CGT purposes would be £5,000 (although everyone gets a £3,000 CGT-free annual allowance).

Putting an asset into some types of trust delays the CGT liability (if the relief is properly claimed). But when it is eventually sold, the gain will still be calculated from the point at which you bought it, not from the point at which it was put into a trust.

But Quarmby said: "If and when the trustees sell that asset, a CGT liability will be calculated from its gain in value since it was acquired by the benefactor and how much it was eventually sold for. This gain can be big."

However, assets left after your death, and outside of a trust, do not trigger CGT because their value is reset at the market rate when you die, so there is no gain to be taxed.

HOW MUCH DO TRUSTS COST?

There is no minimum amount you can put into a trust, but they come with their own set-up and running costs, so it is important to make sure the tax savings outweigh the charges.

Generally the initial professional fees for setting up a trust range between £5,000 and £12,000, Quarmby said. If professional trustees are appointed then this will add another £3,000 to £5,000 a year. Trustees who are not professionals will need to pay about £500 to £800 a year for ongoing advice and help to make sure that any tax due is paid.

Johanna Noble Money Editor

Archaic tax system invites fraud and punishes innocent mistakes

Paying the wrong amount of stamp duty has cost Angela Rayner her job. The debacle highlights one thing: our tax system is incredibly complicated and unless your affairs are extremely straightforward, you could get caught out.

Taxes have been around for thousands of years. We had them on wool, wine and windows, but it took until 1799 for Britain to have a tax on income, introduced by the prime minister William Pitt the Younger.

Since then we've seen tax after tax added. There are now more than 100 and each comes with pages of rules and regulations.

These taxes are being tweaked regularly – between 2022 and 2024 there were no fewer than 240 tax policy changes. Every year we brace for more tax tweaks in the budget.

Tax has become complicated, which increases the risk of mistakes. And what makes things worse is that our tax regime is so outdated that it doesn't work for modern households.

> **It's so complicated that even the experts get it wrong**

It is famous for letting down families by ignoring household income. Since the introduction of independent taxation in 1990, our tax system has focused almost exclusively on individual incomes and paid little attention to household or family finances.

And it is now even more complicated for anyone with a non-traditional set-up: the couple who cohabit but decide not to marry; the blended families with children from previous relationships; the dual income no kids (Dinks); those who decide to marry for the second (or third) time.

Married couples and civil partners get income tax breaks, and gifts made between them are usually free of inheritance tax and capital gains tax.

The amount that children can inherit tax-free can be much higher if their parents were married or in a civil partnership because their allowances can be combined.

HM Revenue & Customs is stuck in the dark ages, it seems.

The taxman has made tax so complicated that even the experts are getting it wrong. According to Rayner, this is what happened to her. She said she had relied on incorrect advice, although the legal firm she used when buying the flat denies that it gave her any tax advice.

If she has been given the wrong advice, that's madness.

Taxpayers should not have to pay loads of money for an expert to set up a trust – which could cost up to £12,000 to sort out, with annual running costs in the hundreds on top – and then have to worry that they might still have broken some intricate tax laws. That so many resort to paying for tax advice in the first place is a clear indicator of just how complicated the system has become.

It also shows that even if you go to great lengths to make sure you have done what is best for you and your family, the system can still trip you up. Tax planning is often essential, but one wrong step, however innocent or little, can still easily push you into tax evasion territory. Complex, archaic and ripe for reform. Welcome to the tax system where even a tax expert worries about getting it right.

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The 8 ways the taxman is spying on you

HMRC could be checking your car on Street View or flicking through your holiday photos on Instagram, warns *Jack Simpson*

From scouring your bank and social media accounts and using AI to trawl through your data to simply paying informants, HM Revenue & Customs is finding new and effective ways to keep track of taxpayers.

The tax office has revealed that it is using artificial intelligence software to monitor the social media of suspected tax dodgers – but it isn't only potential criminals who are being monitored.

And with the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, directing HMRC officials to recoup £7.5 billion in unpaid tax a year by 2029, the spying is likely to increase.

Here are eight ways that you could be under surveillance – without realising it.

SUPERCOMPUTING

At the heart of HMRC's spying capabilities is the taxman's Connect software, introduced in 2010. It analyses data from more than 30 sources and uses AI to build a digital profile of taxpayers.

These can include information from credit agencies, records from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and, in some cases, even bank accounts. If the software spots discrepancies or patterns suggesting tax evasion or fraud, it will alert a tax investigator, who decides whether to look into the case.

Connect can analyse property ownership data from the Land Registry, compare it with online rental ads from property sites such as Zoopla, and then check them against the rental income listed on a person's tax return.

There is very little in the public domain about Connect, but a freedom of information request in 2023 from PfP, an insurer that specialises in tax investigation cover, found that 55 billion items of data linked to taxpayers were held in the system.

In 2014 the government said that the system, which cost £80 million to set up, had helped in recouping £3 billion of unpaid tax.

But while it has become a key part of HMRC's efforts to track down tax evaders, there are concerns about its use. Jake Hurfurt from the privacy campaign group Big Brother Watch said: "HMRC's use of a mass surveillance to monitor millions of taxpayers across dozens of databases from card payments to social media treats everyone as a suspect by default.

"The government must be much more transparent about how it scrapes huge quantities of data to surveil taxpayers."

HMRC said: "Connect is a powerful analytical tool that has helped make us a world leader in using data to inform and manage risk. The system is not the sole deciding factor in beginning a tax investigation and human insight always makes the final judgment."

BANK TRAWLING

Before June 2021 HMRC could only view transactions on your bank account with your consent. If you denied it permission, it would have to go through a first-tier tax tribunal to request access.

A change of law in 2021 means HMRC can now sidestep these tribunals by issuing a Financial Institution Notice, which legally requires a bank or other financial body to hand over information about a taxpayer.

These notices are issued if HMRC decides they are "reasonably required" for the purpose of checking a known taxpayer's tax position or collecting a tax debt. The taxpayer will also have to be alerted as to the reasons. HMRC can also access other data using these orders, such as any dividends paid by your investments, and your pension contributions.

ONLINE SALES CHECKING

If you buy or sell on platforms such as eBay or Vinted, or let out your spare room on Airbnb, or even sell a vehicle on AutoTrader, HMRC can easily find out about it.

Since January 2024 digital platforms have had to collect and share details with HMRC on how much sellers have earned – although usually only those that have sold at least 30 items, or have total earnings of £1,700 or above.

Chris Etherington from the accountancy firm RSM UK said: "There were some fears initially that this would see people getting inquiries for some jeans that they sold on Vinted, but that was never the case.

"What HMRC is most interested in is people who are trading and genuinely undertaking a trade that is liable to income tax."

A seller who makes more than £1,000 from the goods that they sell online will be regarded as a trader by HMRC and so will have to fill out a tax return and pay tax on anything earned above that level. This will increase to £3,000 in 2027.

SOCIAL MEDIA SCOURING

HMRC openly admits that it observes, monitors, records and retains public internet data, such as news reports, blogs and social media posts, to detect evasion and crime.

For example, someone's social media can reveal lavish spending that doesn't tally with the income they have reported to the taxman.

"This is not a new thing; there has always been an element of investigators looking at what is in the public domain to determine whether the income being declared by taxpayers matches their tax return," Etherington said.

"It might have been used to look at somebody in the public eye, but now everybody has a platform to share their lifestyle or affairs, that has become an important tool for investigators."

Last month the government confirmed that it uses AI to monitor some social media accounts, but only as part of criminal investigations into suspected tax cheats.

The government said: "Use of AI for social media monitoring is restricted to criminal investigations and subject to legal oversight. Robust safeguards are in place and this does not replace human decision-making."

55bn

The number of pieces of taxpayer information held by HMRC's Connect software in 2023

£852k

The total paid by HMRC to snitches whose tip-off proved "actionable intelligence" in 2024-25

STREET SNOOPING

Despite now being heavily reliant on technology to identify and pursue potential tax issues, there is still a place for old-fashioned shoe leather detective work by investigators.

Nimesh Shah from the accountancy firm Blick Rothenberg said: "When I first started 20 years ago and there was less data around, the way the tax office would understand what's going on would be to literally go and have a poke around premises where they suspected evasion or fraud. It happens less now, but site visits do still occur."

Nowadays HMRC can use tools such as Google Street View to make these checks from their desk – keeping an eye out for flashy cars parked on driveways or signs of expensive renovations. But there have also been more unusual uses for it.

In 2013 the accountancy firm UHY Hacker Young said it examined a case where HMRC used Google Street View to examine school fête signs in parents' gardens to find out whether their child went to public or private school.

SNITCHING

It is not only HMRC that could be spying on you and your tax affairs. In the 2024-25 tax year there were a record 164,670 reports made by informants to HMRC, up from 152,000 the year before.

Shopping tax cheats can result in decent rewards too, with more than £850,000 being paid out in 2024-25, according to government data, with fees being decided by HMRC on a discretionary basis.

The government is also looking to introduce a more generous US-style reward scheme for informants, where rewards are linked to the amount of money that the taxman gains from the information given.

Details have yet to be revealed, but the Internal Revenue Service in the US usually pays informants between 15 and 30 per cent of the proceeds collected.

WHISTLEBLOWING

While extremely rare, HMRC has in the past used information obtained through data leaks to launch investigations into people it has suspected of tax evasion.

Probably the most high-profile came in 2010 when it received data on about 8,000 UK taxpayers that had Swiss-based accounts with HSBC, which had been leaked by the bank's former employee and whistleblower Hervé Falciani.

HMRC was able to identify 1,100 taxpayers who owed £135 million in unpaid tax.

Councils use this tactic to catch out tax evaders too. In Cornwall, residents can now report properties they suspect are not being lived in all year round to make sure that their owners do not try to avoid paying the double council tax on second homes that came into effect in April.

LOOKING ABROAD

The UK, along with more than 100 countries including those in the EU and China – and even tax havens such as Jersey and the Cayman Islands – are part of the Common Reporting Standard, an agreement to share information about accounts and financial assets.

It was created by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a group of developed countries, in 2014 to fight tax evasion through the use of overseas accounts.

This data, which includes account balances and details on what has been earned on interest, dividends or the sale of investments, is passed on to the country where the person is a tax resident, so it can assess what tax is owed.

Shah said: "Gone are the days when these illegal practices went on, where people would hide money in overseas territories from the taxman.

"The world is much smaller now due to the information exchange through the Common Reporting Standard."

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Savers withdraw £18bn in rush to beat the tax grab on pensions

Rachel Mortimer

There has been a scramble to take cash from pensions and beat an impending inheritance tax raid – and a possible change to the rules around the cherished tax-free lump sum.

Between April last year and March this year about 211,000 pension savers took their 25 per cent lump sum – almost a third more than in the year before.

They withdrew a total of £18.1 billion, up from £11.25 billion the previous year, according to figures from the Financial Conduct Authority, the City watchdog, obtained by the wealth manager Evelyn Partners.

The surge coincided with the announcement in October's budget that most pensions would be included in an estate for inheritance tax purposes from April 2027 (although anything left to a spouse or civil partner will remain exempt). The government estimates that 213,000 estates in the 2027-28 tax year will include inheritable pension wealth.

Nearly £10.5 billion was withdrawn between October and March after the plans were revealed, up from £6 billion over the same period the year before.

But advisers say the rush has also been triggered by speculation that the pensions tax-free lump sum could be in the chancellor's crosshairs as she tries to raise revenue. In the lead-up to the budget last year and to the spring statement in March concerns were rife that it could be reduced. Rachel Reeves's budget this year will be on November 26.

Most savers can take 25 per cent of their pension pot tax-free, up to a limit of £268,275, when they turn 55 (rising to 57 from 2028). It can be taken all in one go or staggered throughout retirement.

Emma Sterland from Evelyn Partners said: "While some will doubtless have taken their tax-free cash as part of a well thought out plan, you can't help feeling that much of this increase is a panicked dive into pensions sparked by uncertainty over policy change."

Financial advisers say they have been inundated with concerns from clients about the future of the tax-free lump sum. But it is unwise to make big financial decisions based on speculation and advisers usually recommend not taking any action until any rule changes are confirmed.

Sterland said: "Our financial planners are still experiencing something similar to last year. Many savers have a specific purpose in mind for their tax-free lump sum – like clearing mortgages, giving to children, or a carefully thought out income strategy – and while they ideally might not take it quite yet, they are wrestling with the fear that if they don't they could lose out."

Taking tax-free cash early, without a specific need for it, also means taking noney out of a tax-protected savings pot and moving it to one where it could be subject to tax, Sterland said.

Those with a defined benefit pension, which pays a set, often inflation-linked income for life, will typically only have one decision to make: take their tax-free sum and get a set income, or leave it and get a higher income.

There is more choice open for savers with a defined contribution pension (the kind that will be subject to inheritance tax from April 2027), where how much you get in retirement is based on how much is paid in and how your investments fare.

They can take the entire tax-free lump sum in one go, and will need to decide what to do with the rest of the pension: buy an annuity (an insurance product that pays an income for life), , move it into drawdown (where you leave it invested and take money as and when you need it), or take it all as cash.

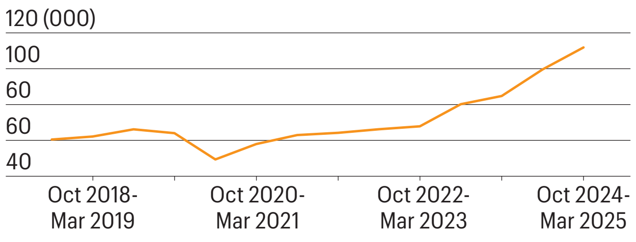
Or they can take the tax-free cash in stages as part of the regular income from the pension, which means paying less tax when they do make withdrawals – each time money was taken from the pension, 25 per cent of it would be tax-free.

£11bn

IThe amount withdrawn in tax-free lump sums from April 2023 to March

Tax-free bonanza

The number of pots where the only withdrawals were lump sums



Source: FCA/Evelyn Partners

'I'm 86 and still save £200 each month. Today's young don't think the same'

Gen Z and baby boomers have very different attitudes to money, but they all put money away — just for different reasons. *Imogen Tew* meets some dedicated savvy savers of all ages

ADRIAN SHERRATT; VICKI COUCHMAN; NICK DAWE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

When Pat Purkiss's state pension lands in her bank account each month, she immediately puts £200 into her savings account, which she says is about a third of what she gets. She has to work hard to make the rest stretch, but the former medical secretary says she simply "has to save".

"I don't even know what I'm saving for really. I wouldn't enjoy spending it," said Purkiss, 86, from Christchurch in Dorset. "It's ingrained in me that I must put money away. I've always paid a proportion of what's coming in into a savings account and a cash Isa, and I'm still doing it now – the money comes in and goes back out the same day."

Purkiss traces her lifelong savings habit back to when she was a child. She remembers being about five and owning a "very heavy" Post Office savings book, which had holes that you poked notes through. Her mother kept the key.

She was only young, but the lesson was learnt. She remained a diligent saver her whole life, squirrelling away some of her pay cheque every month, and missing out on holidays and meals out to bolster her finances.

IT'S A GENERATIONAL THING

Purkiss said that her rigid habits haven't been inherited by her daughter, Tracy, 62, or granddaughter, Katie, 37. "I notice such a difference in them. My daughter does save a bit, but not like I used to. I was always terrified that I wouldn't have enough money," she said.

"And my granddaughter is always abroad somewhere, she goes on about five holidays a year. I don't blame her, really, but it's completely different to how my life was. I was always taught that you don't have luxuries, you put it away for later – but today's younger people don't think about the consequences."

Pat Purkiss, left; Alex Fox, above; and Rocky Mahynduz, below

Purkiss thinks the main divide is that she never expected to inherit anything from her parents, while her daughter and granddaughter know that they will get money from her estate.

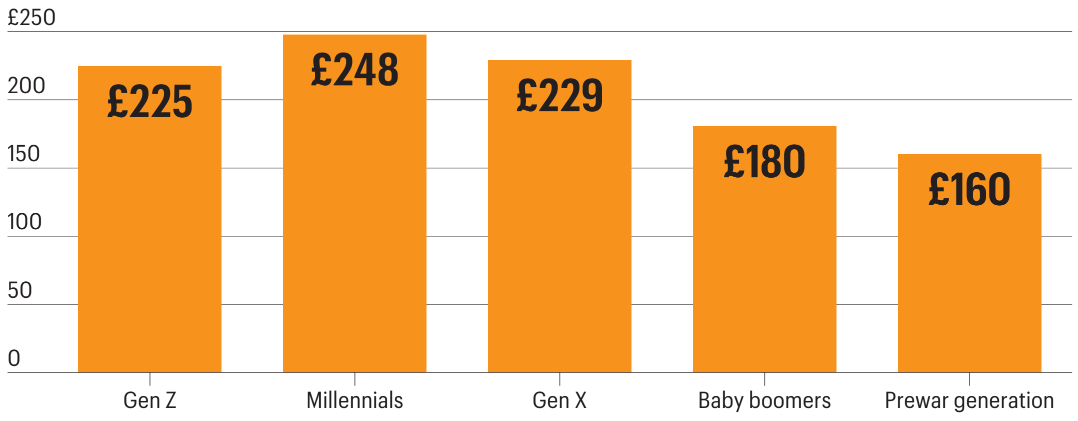
She has already helped her granddaughter with money for a house deposit, and paid off her daughter's mortgage. The money came from an unexpected inheritance from her own mother, which she split between the three of them.

She said: "I think that's partly why they don't save the same way I do. I blew some money on a cruise for the three of us for my daughter's 60th birthday, and spent £9,000 on my conservatory, but other than that I don't spend anything really. I don't have expensive tastes and live off leftovers. I don't waste anything.

"I still have an iPhone 8. It's so old that I can't even get my banking app on it. And I recently splurged on a mobility scooter, but I paid £500 for a second-hand one – I wouldn't want to spend thousands on a brand-new one."

EXTRA COSTS

How much each generation said their bills had risen in the past year



Source: OSB Group

Perhaps that lifetime of saving has led older generations to be more confident about their savings now.

According to research by the mortgage and savings firm OSB group, 45 per cent of baby boomers and the prewar generation (those aged 79 or older) felt anxious if they didn't feel they had enough saved, compared with 66 per cent of millennials and 56 per cent across all age groups.

Some 81 per cent of the prewar generation agreed that saving money helped them to feel "in control of their finances", compared with 69 per cent across all age groups.

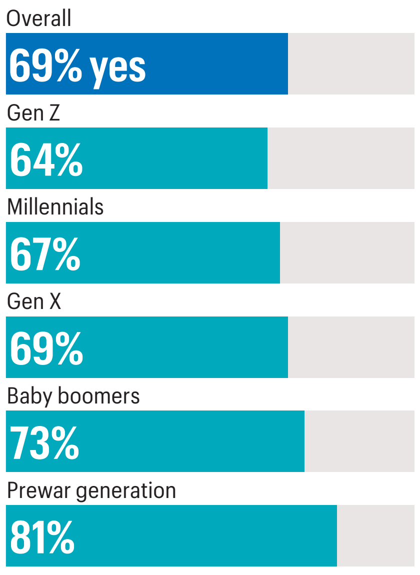
'I'M 22 AND I PUT AWAY HALF MY EARNINGS'

Rocky Mahynduz is a typical member of Gen Z (those aged 18 to 27, according to OSB) – he loves the gym and dreads the thought of moving back to his home city once he graduates.

Unlike the stereotypical university student, however, Mahynduz is a big saver. The 22-year-old from Derby studies at St Mary's University in Twickenham and works part-time as a gym coach and bartender. He puts away half his earnings, saving about £400 a month.

Most of his savings pot is earmarked for rent in London when he graduates in two years – "I do not want to go back to Derby," he said – but he also uses it to fund some spending, such as on nice clothes or Christmas gifts. He saved £2,000 for a seven-week holiday to the Democratic Republic of the Congo last year and is hoping to buy a car.

DOES SAVING MAKE YOU FEEL IN CONTROL OF YOUR FINANCES?



Source: OSB Group

He said: "I think it comes from what I learnt from people older than me. I see the consequences if you don't save and the benefits if you do. It's not necessarily from family, but just wider society.

"I don't really feel like I miss out on much. Maybe some holidays, the last time I went away was last summer, but I still go on a big night out every other month and just don't spend that much on non-essentials. I'm not the kind of person to go out every single weekend anyway."

His saving habit may be unusual but, according to the OSB survey, Mahynduz's goals are fairly in line with his generation. OSB found that Gen Z were most likely to save for "sunny days" – something like a holiday or car. Sunny day saving falls as you get older, while the importance of rainy-day saving grows, researchers said.

Louise Halliwell from the savings bank Kent Reliance, which is part of OSB, said: "Different savings goals are important to different generations, and different savings products can help at different times.

"In your early twenties, paying into a pension is an easy way to build up a pot without noticing the loss. As you move into your forties, Isas can be popular. We have many customers in their eighties who are extremely 'savings savvy', who want to be able to access their money as and when it's needed."

> **I do have a big night out every other month – I just don't spend that much on non essentials**
>
> ROCKY MAHYNDUZ, 22, STUDENT

'I HAVE TWO SAVINGS POTS, ONE FOR FUN, ONE LONGER TERM'

All generations are, of course, affected by the wider economy. High mortgage rates, soaring rents and an increase in the cost of living since the pandemic means that for many younger people, saving isn't an option.

Alex Fox, 43, a disability adviser at a university, classes herself as a saver – over four years she managed to build up £20,000 that she used to buy her two-bedroom cottage in Gloucestershire – but now she struggles to put away anything.

She said: "My savings aren't great. I'm single, I have a mortgage and it's quite hard to put stuff away on a day-to-day basis with the cost of living crisis, mortgage rates and trying to do up my house. Just existing is so expensive."

Fox pays £160 a month on a loan she took out when her windows needed replacing. Once this is paid back in about a year, she will be able to funnel that to her savings instead. For now, however, she simply puts away what she can. Sometimes, it's about £25 a month.

"My savings habit is still there. My heart wants to save but my brain and the economy is making it difficult," Fox said. "I have two savings pots – one for fun stuff, one for longer-term stuff – and I would like to put more away for getting older, the inevitable stuff, but at the moment it's about finding the money."

Fox's biggest problem is the stereotype that her generation (millennials) are not able to afford certain milestones, such as buying a property, because they spend too much money. One trope is that they spend money on takeaway coffees and avocados – items that older generations perceive as luxuries.

She said: "It is just a load of rubbish. It's a totally different world now and house prices are so high, especially if you are a single person like me. The idea that we are extravagant spenders is ridiculous. I feel sorry for people younger than me or around my age that haven't been able to save enough to buy a house because of the severe cost. It's really tough."

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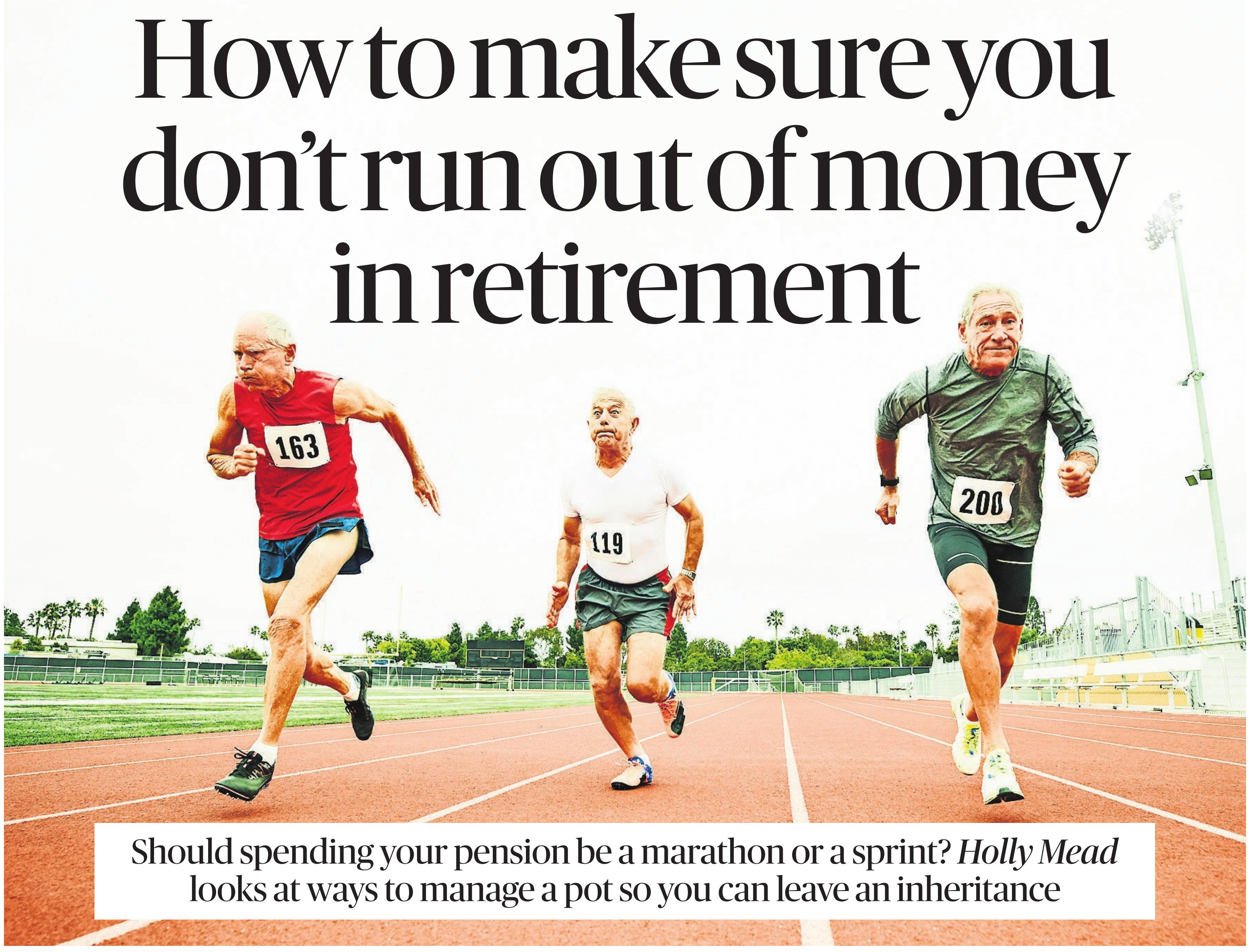


How to make sure you don't run out of money in retirement

Should spending your pension be a marathon or a sprint? *Holly Mead* looks at ways to manage a pot so you can leave an inheritance

How to make your pension pot last the distance is one of the biggest headaches facing anyone about to retire.

This is particularly true for those who decide to use drawdown, a strategy where savers can withdraw cash from their pot while leaving the rest invested.

The main appeal of this option is that it gives savers flexibility and control over their money. But with that comes the mammoth task of working out how much you need to cover the lifestyle you want while making sure it is sustainable.

Experts often recommend the 4 per cent rule. This simply means withdrawing 4 per cent of the value of your pension each year – so if you had a £300,000 pot, you would take £12,000 – and leaving the rest invested to continue growing.

The aim is that the invested portion of the pot grows enough to replenish itself each year, so it never falls in value. Alternatively, you could withdraw more with the aim of your pot being near zero at the end of your retirement, but it's a gamble on how long you think you will live.

How much you withdraw depends on your goals. But you need to be prepared for curveballs along the way, such as a stock market crash or unexpected costs.

Rachel Vahey from the investment platform AJ Bell said: "It is important to set a strategy to meet your needs and wants in retirement, but which is sustainable for life. These are tricky decisions. After all, you are battling unknowns, such as how much your pot will grow and how long you need the money for."

So what's the best way to manage your pension pot? We take a look at the figures.

LEAVE SOME BEHIND

For many savers, leaving an inheritance is a priority. This requires a drawdown strategy that provides a decent income but doesn't fully deplete your pot.

Say you had a £500,000 pension pot and withdrew your 25 per cent tax-free lump sum of £125,000. This would leave you with £375,000, which you could leave invested to draw down from.

Withdrawing 4 per cent of this would give an income of £15,000 for a year, leaving £360,000 in the pot.

AJ Bell looked at what might happen next. For simplicity, it did not factor in inflation, and all returns are after fees.

If the remaining cash grew at a rate of 3 per cent after fees – a modest estimate – then after a year the pot would be worth £370,800.

Let's assume you continued to take an annual income of £15,000, and the pot continued to grow at 3 per cent a year.

By age 80, 15 years into retirement if you started drawing on your pot at 65, you would have withdrawn a total of £350,000 including the lump sum, and there would still be £296,855 in the pot. By age 90, you would have withdrawn £500,000 in total, and there would still be £221,871.

This shows that with enough money saved and a modest withdrawal rate, it is possible to never run out of money even if you make it into your early 100s.

But this is harder to achieve with a smaller pot. Someone with a £250,000 pension pot who withdrew their 25 per cent tax-free lump sum (£62,500) and then took an income of £15,000 a year would run out of money when they were 80. This is because their withdrawal rate is 6 per cent of the original pot.

SPEND EVERYTHING

For other savers, the priority is to take the largest sustainable income possible and deplete their pot to zero by the time they die. Clearly this is tricky to plan, because no one knows how long they will live.

A 65-year-old man can expect to live on average another 19.8 years, according to the Office for National Statistics, and women another 22.5 years. This gives an average life expectancy of about 85 and 88 respectively.

Assuming a £500,000 pension pot, and that you take the 25 per cent tax-free lump sum, with this strategy you can take a higher income of £22,500 a year – 6 per cent. This would leave you with £352,500 after your first withdrawal which, assuming 3 per cent investment growth, should replenish to £363,075 after a year.

Continuing this pattern would mean you run out of money when you are 87; some 22 years into retirement.

Someone with a smaller £250,000 pension pot withdrawing the same amount – equivalent to a 9 per cent withdrawal rate – would run out of money in year ten, when they were 75.

MANAGE A STOCK MARKET FALL

Of course, the stock market is not always smooth sailing and the risk of leaving your pension invested after retiring is that a market crash hits your savings. Many investors experienced exactly that this year when the American president Donald Trump announced trade tariffs, causing the FTSE 100 to drop more than 10 per cent and the S&P 500 about 12 per cent.

In these instances, savers may have to adapt their plans. Those with other savings could draw on these instead to give their pension pot a chance to recover, or you could reduce how much you withdraw if this is not an option.

Say you had a £500,000 pension pot, had taken your £125,000 tax-free lump sum and were taking an annual income of £15,000. In year five, when you were 69, you would still have £342,429 invested.

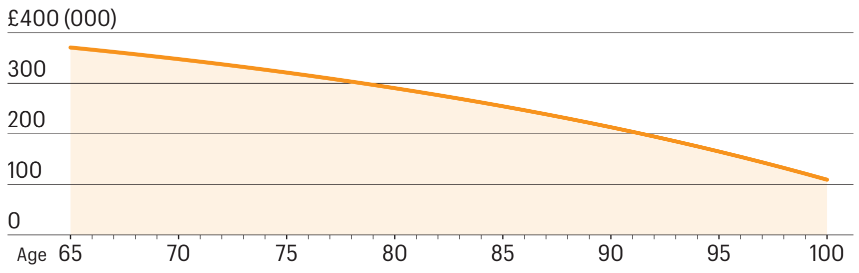
However, if the market then fell 20 per cent, the value of your pot would drop to £273,943. AJ Bell calculated that you could continue to take the same income and, while your pot would no longer last well beyond 100, it would not run out until you were 95.

Someone with a smaller pot would feel the shock more acutely. With a £250,000 pot, if they took the tax-free lump sum and an annual income of £15,000, by year five they would have £131,396. If the market then plunged 20 per cent, the value of the pot would drop to £105,117. If they continued to withdraw the same income, the money would run out in year 13, when they were 77.

Vahey said: "There are tools that can help you work out what a sustainable income level could be, but none of this is easy." Speaking to an independent financial adviser could be worthwhile for those concerned about managing their savings.

THE 4% WITHDRAWAL STRATEGY

Withdrawing your 25 per cent lump sum then £15,000 a year from a £500,000 pot



Assumes investment growth of 3 per cent a year after fees. Source: AJ Bell

Best buys

CURRENT ACCOUNTS

CREDIT INTEREST

Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate	Balance (for reward)	Contact
Nationwide BS	FlexDirect	None	5%[1]	–	03457 30 20 10
Bank of Scotland	Vantage Classic Account	None	3%	–	0345 721 3141
Lloyds Bank	Club Lloyds	None	3%	–	0345 300 0000

OVERDRAFTS*

Provider	Account name	Account fee	Interest rate [2]	0% overdraft limit	Contact
Starling Bank	Current Account	None	15%	£0	0207 930 4450
First Direct	1st Account	None	39.9%	£250	0345 600 2424
Virgin Money	M Plus Account	None	19.9%	£0	0800 678 3654

[1] Introductory rate for a limited period. [2] Equivalent annual rate. * Based on the lowest cost of an overdraft of £500 over 30 days. Some accounts require minimum funding/direct debits to open or get rates shown

CREDIT CARDS

INTRODUCTORY RATES

Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	APR [1]	Reward	Contact
TSB	Platinum Purchase	0% for 25 months	24.95%	No	0345 835 3846
Barclaycard	Platinum Balance Transfer	0% for 24 months	24.9%	No	0800 151 0900
M&S Bank	Purchase Plus	0% for 24 months	24.9%	No	0800 997 996

BALANCE TRANSFERS

Provider	Card type	Introductory purchase	Transfer fee [2]	APR [1]	Contact
MBNA	Long Balance Transfer	0% for 34 months	2.99%	24.94%	0345 606 2062
HSBC	Balance Transfer	0% for 34 months	3.19%	24.9%	0800 328 1370
Virgin Money	Balance Transfer	0% for 34 months	3.25%	24.9%	0800 011 3210

CASHBACK CARDS

Provider	Card type	APR [1]	Cashback	Contact
American Express	Cashback Everyday	29.7%	0.5%-1%. Intro 5% for 5 months (max £125)	0800 917 8047
Virgin Money	Everyday Cashback	24.9%	0.25% Intro 1% for 3 months (max £15 a month)	0800 011 3210
NatWest	Travel Reward	27.9%	0.1%-1% on spend over £1 a year[3]	0347 888 444

[1] APR = annual percentage rate, dependent on credit rating. [2] Fee charged on the amount of each balance transfer during the introductory period

[3] Eligible travel spend for higher cashback. Borrowing rates and availability of products are subject to individual credit ratings. Terms apply to cashback.

FOREIGN CURRENCY

Interbank rates at 5pm on Friday, which show where the market is trading. They are not indicative of the rate you could get.

EURO	GBP>EUR	1.15
USA	GBP>USD	1.35
TURKEY	GBP>TRY	55.91
AUSTRALIA	GBP>AUD	2.06

MORTGAGES

2-YEAR FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
First Direct	3.78%	Fixed for 2 years	60%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	3.98%	Fixed for 2 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.32%	Fixed for 2 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

5-YEAR FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
First Direct	3.85%	Fixed for 5 years	60%	£490	SVL	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.09%	Fixed for 5 years	80%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48
First Direct	4.32%	Fixed for 5 years	90%	£490	PV	0800 48 24 48

LONG-TERM FIXED RATES

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Nationwide BS	4.45%	Fixed for 10 years	60%	£999	PV	0333 060 03 25
Nationwide BS	4.74%	Fixed for 10 years	80%	£999	PV	0333 060 03 25
Nationwide BS	4.99%	Fixed for 10 years	90%	£999	PV	0333 060 03 25

TRACKERS* / DISCOUNTS

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
Santander	4.14%	Base rate + 0.14% for 2 years	60%	£999	PV	0800 555 100
HSBC	4.39%	Base rate + 0.39% for 2 years	80%	£999	PV	0800 494 999
Hanley Economic BS	4.8%	3.19% discount for 2 years	90%	0	BV	01782 255 000

FIRST-TIME BUYER / LOW DEPOSIT

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
HSBC	4.94%	Fixed to 30.11.27	95%	None	BV	0800 494 999
West Bromwich BS	4.98%	Fixed to 31.12.28	95%	None	V	0800 298 0008
HSBC	4.79%	Fixed to 30.11.30	95%	None	DV	0800 494 999

BUY TO LET

Lender	Rate	Scheme	Max LTV	Fee	Notes	Contact
The Mortgage Works	4.29%	Fixed to 30.11.27	75%	None		0345 607 3021
HSBC	4.39%	Fixed to 30.11.27	75%	None	PV	0800 494 999
HSBC	3.84%	Fixed to 30.11.30	75%	£3,999	PV	0800 494 999

Early repayment charge applies unless otherwise stated. * Most deals track Bank of England base rate. A = £500 cashback; B = £250 cashback; C = £300 cashback; D = £350 cashback; E= No early repayment charge; F = First-time buyers only; G = £150 cashback; H = £400 cashback; I = £1,000 cashback; L= Free legal work for remortgages ; P = Purchases only; R = Free legal work and valuation for remortgages; S = Remortgage only; T = £250 towards legal fees; V = Free valuation

SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

EASY ACCESS

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Cahoot	Simple Saver	£1	4.4%	cahoot.com
Snoop	Easy Access Savings	£1	4.35%	via app
Spring Savings	Easy saver	£10	4.3%	via app

NOTICE ACCOUNTS

Provider	Account name	Notice period	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
The Stafford BS	Notice 180 Account	180 days	£5,000	4.61%	srbs.co.uk
Earl shilton	180 Day Notice	95 days	£5,000	4.5%	branch or post only
Oxbury	90 Day Notice Tracker Premium	180 days	£10,000	4.5%	oxbury.com

LONG-TERM FIXED-RATES

Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
JN Bank	5 Year Fixed Term Savings	5 years	£100	4.52%	jnbank.co.uk
Chetwood Bank	5 Year Fixed Rate Bond	5 years	£1,000	4.5%	chetwoodbank.co.uk
Birmingham Bank	5 Year Fixed Rate Bond	5 years	£5,000	4.5%	birminghambank.com

DEALS ARE LISTED ONLY IF THEY ARE COVERED BY THE UK FINANCIAL SERVICES COMPENSATION SCHEME (FSCS) OR A EUROPEAN EQUIVALENT

ENERGY DEALS

Table shows the cheapest tariff now available from the cheapest suppliers. Excludes tariffs of less than 12 months' duration, tariffs that do not have national coverage and tariffs where payments are taken in advance of supply.

Supplier	Average annual bill	Rate	Contact
Home Energy	£1,492	Variable	0800 092 7407
Outfox The Market	£1,518	Fixed 1 year	0800 103 2702
Outfox The Market	£1,520	Fixed 2 years	0800 103 2702

Source: Uswitch.com

CASH ISAs

EASY ACCESS

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest	Transfers in	Contact
Cynergy Bank	Online Isa	£1	4.35%	Yes	cynergybank.co.uk
The Family BS	Market Tracker Cash Isa	£500	4.3%	Yes	familybuildingsociety.co.uk

FIXED RATE

Provider	Account name	Term	Min deposit	Rate	Transfers in	Contact
Cynergy Bank	1 Year Fixed Rate Isa	1 year	£1,000	4.32%	Yes	cynergybank.co.uk
United Trust Bank	5 Year Cash Isa Deposit Bond	5 years	£5,000	4.25%	Yes	utbank.co.uk

CHILDREN'S ACCOUNTS

Provider	Account name	Rate type	Min deposit	Interest rate	Contact
Halifax	Kids' Monthly Saver	Fixed	£10	5.5%	halifax.co.uk
Penrith BS	Junior Affinity Regular Saver	Variable	£5	4.45%	branch or post only
Saffron BS	Children's Regular Saver	Variable	£5	4.45%	branch or post only

JUNIOR ISAs

Provider	Account name	Min deposit	Interest rate	Rate	Contact
Nottingham BS	Junior Isa	£1	4.05%	Variable	branch only
Coventry BS	Junior Isa	£1	4%	Variable	branch or post only
Leek BS	Junior Isa	£1	3.85%	Variable	branch or post only

Your Money Matters Katherine Denham

I sold my £4,000 diamond earrings through Hewi. Now where's my money?

Our consumer champion helps a regular user of the designer goods marketplace whose precious jewellery seems to be in limbo

ILLUSTRATION BY NINA KRAUSE, AFTER VERMEER

For many years I have been selling items from my wardrobe via a luxury resale business called Hardly Ever Worn It, or Hewi. Last December I was having some financial difficulties so I listed a pair of diamond earrings for £4,250. I found a buyer and agreed a 10 per cent discount.

They wanted them before Christmas, but I was concerned about sending them in the post in case they were lost. So on December 23, I personally delivered them to Hewi's office near Bond Street in London and a member of staff reassured me that the transaction would proceed smoothly.

Then in January Hewi told me that the buyer had concerns about the fastening. They said the earrings were difficult to open and that they had been sent back to Hewi so they could be checked by one of its jewellers. I said there was nothing wrong with the earrings and the clasp was designed to be quite firm.

Hewi said the jeweller would probably take a "swift look", and then would be able to send them back to the buyer so that I could be paid. Despite my many follow-ups by phone, email and WhatsApp, it has not sent my money.

In June, Hewi finally paid me for a £600 pair of Hermès trainers that I sold in March. But it's now August and I still don't have the money for the earrings. This situation has caused me significant financial and emotional distress.

I relied on this sale during a very difficult period in my life and just can't believe that this company can withhold payment for such a long time.

Name and address supplied

KATHERINE DENHAM WRITES

You had hoped that selling your earrings would ease your financial difficulties, but Hewi ended up leaving you even worse off: without money or the diamonds to sell elsewhere. Despite your many pleas to get the company to pay you, no payment ever arrived and you told me that you felt powerless.

Hewi, which began in 2012, is an online marketplace for buying and selling second-hand designer clothing and accessories.

There are two types of sellers on the platform: private sellers like you who list the items themselves and communicate with buyers directly, and those who use a VIP service where Hewi manages the whole process.

For private sellers Hewi charges 21.6 per cent, which includes VAT and commission. This means Hewi would deduct £826.20 from the sale of the earrings (which were bought for £3,825 after the 10 per cent reduction you agreed), leaving you with nearly £3,000.

According to the company's website, the money should be released to sellers seven days after the shipping date for UK orders or as soon as the buyer confirms receipt.

If the buyer isn't happy with their purchase they can raise a dispute, at which point Hewi will intervene to resolve the issue. This can cause delays in payment, but an eight-month wait seemed unreasonable.

You showed me emails and WhatsApp messages that you had sent to Hewi over six months chasing for payment.

Your Hewi account also showed that you were "awaiting payment" on this sold item.

The day after I spoke to Hewi it apologised and said the earrings would be sent back to you. While you had been told that the buyer had concerns about the clasp, you were not aware that they had decided not to buy them and were surprised to discover that the earrings had been in Hewi's possession since January.

Hewi said: "The earrings are not fixable so are being returned to the seller. They were stored securely at our Mayfair office. When we vacated this office the high-value inventory was reviewed and the earrings were flagged to return to the seller as an urgent priority. The buyer will be refunded."

It said it would post the earrings to you "without any further delay" and had insured them in case they were lost in the post.

Hewi's chief executive, Tatiana Wolter-Ferguson, told me that the staff member you had been communicating with had left the business and had not included the earrings in their handover.

> **It's been eight months and I haven't been paid**

She said the handover process had been reviewed to stop this from happening in the future.

The company also said it was a mere coincidence that I had got in touch at the same time that it was reviewing its inventory. This has no bearing, however, on why you had been kept in the dark – and without your property – for so long.

Wolter-Ferguson asked me not to publish this article but Hewi had ample opportunity to put this right and caused you a huge amount of stress for eight months. She said this was a rare situation and acknowledged that the earrings should have been sent straight back to you.

To say sorry, the company said it would waive commission if you were to resell the earrings on Hewi's website at a later date. You said this offer was of little use to you because you no longer trusted the company.

At least you finally have your earrings back. You said: "I'm so happy to have them back. Thank you for helping me, you are an absolute champion."

£1,568,692

The amount Your Money Matters has saved readers of The Times and Sunday Times this year

CONTACT US

If you have a money problem that you would like Katherine Denham to investigate, email yourmoneymatters@thetimes.co.uk. Please include a phone number

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Ask the experts

Where's best for my £835k while I wait to buy a flat?

ANNA BOWES FROM THE PRIVATE OFFICE, AN ADVICE FIRM

Q My wife and I are selling our house and moving into a flat until we find another house we want to buy. We're wondering what is the best thing to do with our sales proceeds in the meantime – about £835,000. We would need access to all of this when we buy and we don't know when that will be. We would also like monthly interest as we will have expensive storage costs to pay each month.

Alan, Middlesex

A The most important things to consider here are access to your money and the safety of your capital.

Since you don't know exactly when you'll need the funds, it would be unwise to tie them up in a fixed-term account with no access until the term matures. A handful of companies may allow early withdrawal, but this is rare and usually comes with a significant penalty on your interest. Easy-access savings accounts or short notice accounts would be far more suitable for you.

Another key consideration is Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) protection. Deposits of up to £85,000 per banking licence are protected as standard in the event that a bank goes bust. With a balance of £835,000 you would normally need to spread your savings across many firms to ensure full protection. If the accounts are in joint names then you could put up to £170,000 in each with full cover.

If this sale is that of your main home, however, you could be covered by the FSCS Temporary High Balance Protection. This provides up to £1 million of protection per person, per authorised bank or building society, for up to six months from the date you receive the funds. It covers certain life events, including the sale of your main residence, giving you peace of mind while you search for your next property.

On the question of interest, while many firms pay annually, some will pay monthly. It's important to check before opening an account if you will be relying on the regular income to cover your storage costs.

At the time of writing, the top easy-access accounts are paying rates above 4 per cent, although some may limit the balance you can hold in the account. Charter Savings Bank is paying 4.23 per cent monthly interest (4.31 per cent AER if you don't take out the interest each month) on balances of up to £1 million. Cahoot's Simple Saver is paying a slightly higher rate, with monthly interest of 4.31 per cent gross (4.4 per cent AER) but the maximum balance is £500,000.

Notice accounts can sometimes pay a better rate, but you'll need to give notice before making a withdrawal, for example 30, 60 or 90 days. The top notice account paying monthly income is at GB Bank, paying 4.41 per cent monthly – but you must give 95 days' notice.

Once the six-month temporary protection period has ended under the FSCS, you need to either split your funds into roughly five joint accounts to ensure they are fully covered in the event of a bank going bust, or for simplicity you could consider a National Savings & Investment's Income Bonds, an easy-access account paying 3.3 per cent interest monthly.

You could earn almost 1 per cent more (before the deduction of tax) by spreading your cash into five different accounts elsewhere in the market, but deposits in NS&I accounts are 100 per cent backed by the Treasury, regardless of the balance. This means that you wouldn't need to worry about spreading your money across different firms to stay within FSCS limits.

The maximum you can deposit into the NS&I Income Bonds account is £1 million per person. It is a simpler, if less rewarding, option. And when it comes to the security of your house funds, you may feel that peace of mind takes priority.

Anna Bowes helped to set up the consumer website Savings Champion in 2011

£1m

The value protected by the FSCS per person per bank for up to six months after selling a main home

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Seven million to miss out on the full boost to the state pension

Aaliyah Ahmed

Some seven million pensioners are set to miss out on the 5 per cent boost to the state pension that others will get from April.

That's because they are on the old state pension, where they get an additional earnings-related pension – known as Serps or the state second pension – which is not covered by the government's triple lock. The lock, introduced in 2011, guarantees that the state pension increases each year by average wage growth, inflation or 2.5 per cent – whichever is highest. Wages went up the most this year, so from April the full new pension is likely to rise £599 (5 per cent) from £11,973 to £12,572 a year.

The state second pension, however, goes up in line with inflation, which at the moment is sitting at 3.8 per cent. The old basic state pension, which those on the old system get in addition to the second pension, will go up in line with the triple lock, which could mean a 5 per cent rise from £9,175 to £9,634 a year.

Steve Webb, a former pensions minister who is now a partner at the consultancy LCP, said the split system could, this year, leave many older pensioners worse off than those who retired after 2016 and are on the new unified system. Since 2011 the state pension has gone up with inflation seven times, by 2.5 per cent three times and in line with wages five times.

"The earnings figure due later this month, which will be the one used for the triple lock calculation, is likely to be lower than 5 per cent while inflation could edge higher than 3.8 per cent. If the two even out, everyone could just get inflation on the whole of their pension. But as things stand, millions of older pensioners will miss out."

Tax on pensioners

The disparity comes as the value of the new state pension creeps towards the threshold at which you start paying income tax, which is frozen at £12,570 until 2028. This means that a 5 per cent increase in April would mean that £2 of the new state pension would sit above the tax-free allowance, so a basic rate taxpayer would have to give 40p back to the government.

Adam Cole from the wealth manager Quilter said the sharp increase in the number of pensioners who are paying income tax is a direct result of the threshold freeze.

"It is a textbook example of fiscal drag," he said. "While the state pension has risen in line with inflation thanks to the triple lock, the tax threshold has remained static. As a result, growing numbers of those in retirement, including those with only modest other income streams, are finding themselves with taxable income for the first time."

Helen Morrissey from the investment giant Hargreaves Lansdown said: "Frozen tax allowances look ever more likely to bring more pensioners into tax-paying territory. If we were to see a 4 per cent increase for the 2026-27 financial year, then the full new state pension would hover extremely close to the threshold and be likely to breach it in 2027-28."

Cole added that the situation risks creating confusion and hardship. "Many pensioners are not high earners but are simply victims of a frozen threshold during a period of rising prices. For some, it's their first experience of paying income tax in retirement, leading to confusion, frustration and unexpected bills."

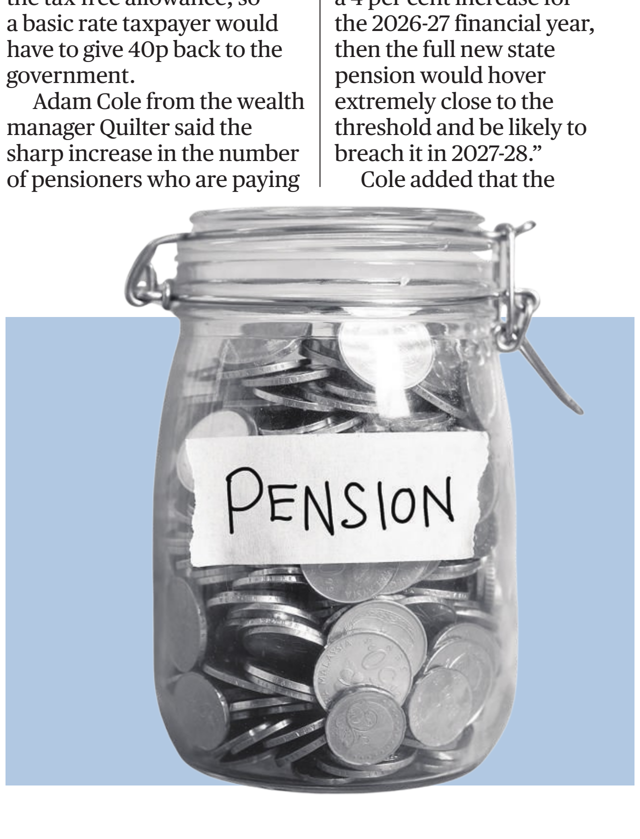
Lisa Picardo from the retirement savings firm PensionBee said the policy risks undermining trust in the system. "The freeze on the personal allowance exposes the contradiction at the heart of the system: the triple lock boosts pensions with one hand, whilst frozen thresholds quietly pull them back down with the other," she said.

"Unless addressed, millions of pensioners could find themselves paying tax on what they believed was a basic entitlement, not a taxable perk."

The Office for Budget Responsibility put the annual cost of the state pension at £125 billion in 2023-24.

Webb said that the government needs to rethink how thresholds are set. "If we think the state pension is the basic amount people need to live on, then it seems odd to take some of it back in taxation. There needs to be a proper review of tax-free allowances for pensioners and workers, rather than allowing the tax system to get tougher each year by stealth."

The inflation figure for the year to September, which will be used when deciding the triple lock increase for next year, will be out next month.



FAME AND FORTUNE DR RICHARD SHEPHERD

'I found £500k of cocaine in a body at the post mortem'

The UK's best-known forensic pathologist has a passion for flying, spent £25,000 on a 'bit of a plane' and has been tempted to buy an island, he tells *John Wright*

NEIL GRIFFITHS

Richard Shepherd, 72, was a Home Office forensic pathologist who performed more than 23,000 post-mortem examinations. He worked on the Princess Diana inquiry, the Hungerford massacre, the sinking of the Marchioness, the Harold Shipman and Stephen Lawrence cases, the 9/11 inquiry, the murder of the MP Jo Cox, the 7/7 bombings and the Clapham Junction train crash. Shepherd, who has five children, has solved the mysteries of countless unexplained deaths, faced serial killers and his evidence has put killers behind bars. His book *Unnatural Causes* was a Sunday Times bestseller. He has appeared on TV in *Death Detective*; *Murder, Mystery and My Family*; and *The Truth About My Murder*. He lives in Northwich, Cheshire, with his wife, Linda, and their two dogs.

How much is in your wallet?
About £70 for popping in for a coffee and sticky bun at a café. OK, several sticky buns! Or if the grandchildren want a lolly. It'll probably last me a month. I only use cash occasionally now. We mainly use debit cards.

What credit cards do you use?
Just one, a Barclaycard for big purchases like holidays and I always pay it off at the end of the month. Much to my wife's frustration I'm not great at taking advantage of benefits that come with various cards. I'm not fussed by points or extra insurance. I have one debit card for personal use, one for business. (I hope my wife doesn't read this because I also fly light aircraft and have a flying debit card for those expenses.)

Are you a saver or a spender?
Definitely a spender. I spent £25,000 in 2018 for a bit of a Piper Arrow: you join a group and share expenses. It means you have use of the plane but you still have to pay for flying hours. I also have a Cessna 172. The first plane I got was a modern-built Spitfire replica, which crashed. I also spent £1,000 over a few years on accessories for keeping bees until my wife became allergic to them. I had six hives and gave the honey away.

What was your first job?
Before uni, at 17/18 I sold carpets for John Lewis in Watford. A Christmas post job, doing night shifts in the sorting office, was my first experience of adult working. It was such an eye-opener about how people behave: a bit more *Sweeney* and misogynist than we'd allow now. But you had to knuckle down. Someone would say, "You've only done three bags. You should've shifted five." I became a doctor and joined the NHS in 1977 for a postgraduate year as house physician. Then I trained as a pathologist for six years, then as a forensic pathologist. So from entering medical school to the job I wanted to do was 17 years. My first forensic post mortem was in 1981. Very little of my work is physically hard but some can be emotionally difficult, especially those involving murder or child neglect. Having left the Home Office Register at 70, I now do a bit of work for local coroners as well as writing, TV and talks.

Shepherd, once offered his young children an ice cream or £5,500 paid by the former prime minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto, left. They chose the ice cream. He loves flying and considered buying a Scottish island, below

Are you better off than your parents?
Yes. My dad was a local authority accountant. We lived in a small detached house in Watford; I went to the local grammar school and we had a nice conventional life. Now I've owned bits of three planes, live in a 14-room house on an acre of land and our five kids have all gone to private school. My mum died when I was nine, so my father brought us up. He believed in education and how it had worked for him. His father was a hatter in Manchester and I see it as a trajectory upwards in disposable incomes and lifestyles. We have holidays in sunnier climes; he never could because there weren't the planes and travel industry to support it. He would've earned £30,000, while I in my highest-earning period as a pathologist and doing lots of other things as well was on £300,000 a year.

When did you first feel wealthy?
In my forties, when the kids were teenagers, which was about 1990. I felt like we had turned the corner. Around then we paid off the mortgage of our first house – a four-bedroom detached house I'd bought for £22,000 in 1978 in Sutton, Surrey. The government made the interest on your mortgage tax-free and you got money off tax with your pension money. These things helped. Then I moved to the Isle of Man and got divorced, which put a huge hole in my finances. But the kids were at university and apart from us giving them support when they bought houses, the house we're in now sees us financially stable.

Have you ever struggled to make ends meet?
Solicitors' fees for the divorce were £10,000 to £20,000. Thinking we had more money after buying our first house made us take on a bigger mortgage, which often made us short for school fees – three kids in private school costing £15,000 to £20,000 three times a year; or buying African safari holidays and suddenly having to find £15,000. Also I was billing coroners and police, not all of whom paid quickly and often months later you'd find out the bill was lost.

> ### Benazir Bhutto paid me £5,500 in cash to review her brother's death

Do you invest in shares?
I've never been good at that. The only shares I ever bought were British Gas when Maggie Thatcher sold everything off. Although I do buy bonds and other investments through an adviser.

Do you own a property?
Yes. This property (worth £1 million) is paid off and when I retired from my job and got my pension, we also bought the bungalow next door, using a buy-to-let mortgage, which my wife and I let out and may move into as we get older.

What's been your best investment?
The house we're in. And Premium Bonds – I've put money into them since the 1970s. I enjoy being told I've won £25 tax-free almost every month. The biggest win I've had was £150. We're at £40,000: close to the £50,000 maximum and we've put in a bit at a time – £50 or £100 on birthdays or special occasions – and it's gradually increased. My best business decision was to agree when Penguin said, "Have you ever considered writing a book?"

And your worst?
Buying back from my son a £12,000 VW Passat I'd already bought for him in 2015.

What's your money weakness?
Not investing as much as I could because I'm nearing that age when I'm less able to rush around and work for money. I should've invested sensibly in small amounts. Although the bungalow has been a good investment, having almost doubled to £600,000, its rent covers the mortgage. Some 18 months ago I got caught by the mortgage price hike and had to remortgage at a high rate and am locked into it for two years.

How much did you earn last year?
About £175,000. About £130,000 of it was fees for post-mortems.

Do you have a pension?
My pension is about a third of my earnings. I encourage my children to pay into a pension because the chances are it's going to be reliable and safer, providing the world doesn't fall apart.

Your most extravagant purchase?
Art we like buying at auctions; the most expensive was £2,500 for a 3 x 2 metre oil painting of a bunch of flowers because my wife likes flowers.

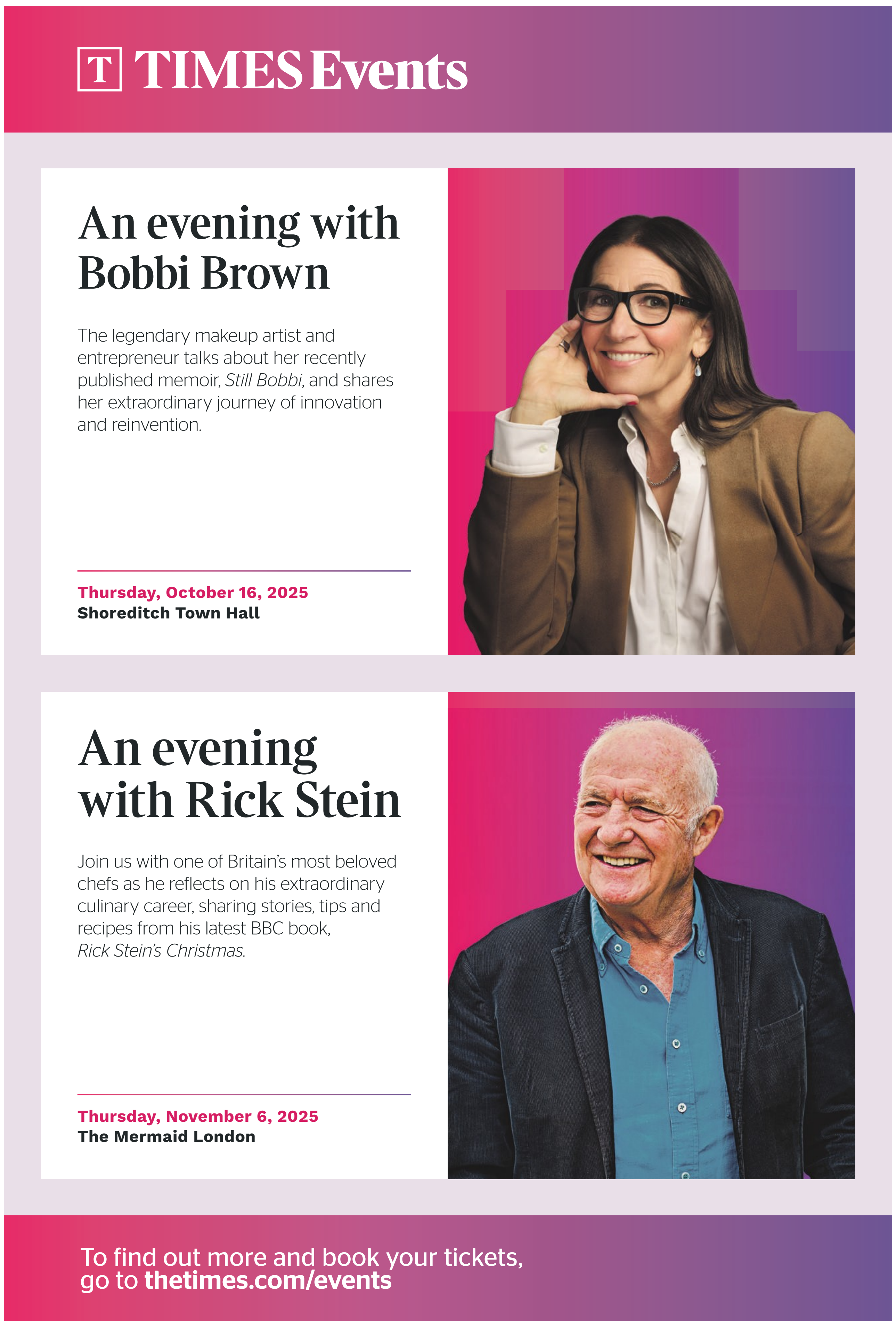
What was your most lucrative work?
My 2018 book *Unnatural Causes* in 30-plus languages has now had more than one million sales and still produces £1,000 a month. For that I got a £200,000 advance, and then £150,000 for my second book, *The Seven Ages of Death*. Once in a boat in Egypt they found two dead bodies on top of the grain in its hold. With the possibility of the cargo all having to be condemned, it was a very lucrative trip. There was a lot of money on an insurance policy, so the insurer was quite happy to pay me £8,000 to go to Egypt to do two post mortems. In the 1990s Benazir Bhutto [the former prime minister of Pakistan] paid me £5,500 in £50 notes to review the 1996 murder of her brother. The money was on the kitchen table when the kids came home from school one day saying, "What's that, what's that?" I said, "You can either have the brown envelope or an ice cream." They all said ice cream.

What was your grimmest moment?
One bank robber had money he'd stolen blowing out of his shirt as he was chased down Camden High Street by armed police. It's the only time I've had to count blood-stained notes on a body. The biggest sums you find are in drug smugglers. "Body packers" in the 1990s and 2000s would swallow drugs in condoms and produce them at the other end. I've found over a kilo of cocaine concealed in that form, worth £250,000 to £500,000.

The weirdest thing I've found on a body was a finger. A man used a sawn-off shotgun and shot his own finger off when killing a drug dealer, allowing the police to take fingerprints, which certainly made identifying him easier.

What if you won the lottery?
I'd make the family financially secure. Although I've always wanted a house somewhere warm, my wife and I looked at buying a little island off the Isle of Gigha in Scotland. But we didn't make an offer. The plane we flew up in to the grass airfield got stuck in mud.

The theatre show Dr Richard Shepherd Time of Death – More Unnatural Causes is touring from September 29. drrichardshepherd.com



TIMES Events

An evening with Bobbi Brown

The legendary makeup artist and entrepreneur talks about her recently published memoir, *Still Bobbi*, and shares her extraordinary journey of innovation and reinvention.

Thursday, October 16, 2025
Shoreditch Town Hall

An evening with Rick Stein

Join us with one of Britain's most beloved chefs as he reflects on his extraordinary culinary career, sharing stories, tips and recipes from his latest BBC book, *Rick Stein's Christmas*.

Thursday, November 6, 2025
The Mermaid London

To find out more and book your tickets, go to **thetimes.com/events**

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15,330

The number of centenarians in England and Wales, according to the Office for National Statistics

The £923 fee for being a landlord

Frederica Miller

Landlords in Lambeth, south London, have been asked to pay £923 per property for a rental licence or risk fines of up to £30,000.

Thanks to rule changes brought in on September 1 most landlords in the borough will have to fill in a licensing form and pay a £650 application fee and £273 charge for managing and enforcing the licensing scheme. The licences will last for five years.

Landlords must submit gas and electrical safety certificates, tenancy agreements and floor plans with their applications.

Not licensing a property would be a criminal offence and could result in £30,000 penalties.

It comes after the government gave councils the power to implement large-scale licensing schemes in December. Lambeth council estimates that more than 9,400 privately rented homes pose serious health and safety risks. Nearly one in three homes in the borough is privately rented.

The chancellor, Rachel Reeves, is said to be considering further charges for landlords in the budget in November. The Treasury is thought to be examining plans to charge national insurance contributions on rental income. At the rumoured rate of 8 per cent, such a move could raise up to £2 billion, but would hit a sector already under strain from higher mortgage costs, tighter regulation and the removal of tax reliefs.

Experts warn that new costs for landlords would be passed on to tenants through higher rents.

£30,000

The maximum fine for not getting a landlord licence

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Many will have heard horror stories of being refused a mortgage or a car loan because of a poor credit rating. But how do these mysterious records of what we borrow, pay back and spend actually work? Can an unpaid phone bill really resurface and scupper you just when you're trying to buy a first home?

This week Holly Mead is joined by Sarah Williams from the online advice blog Debt Camel to dispel some myths and explain the ways you can improve your credit score.

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September 7, 2025

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Home

No Motorcycles
Public Footpath
Stop Heathrow Expansion
stopheathrowexpansion.co.uk

The village that will be destroyed under Heathrow's third runway plans **6**

Red line

Plus Delving into Laura Ashley's archive **8** Best buys for autumn **10** Our nightmare French reno **14**

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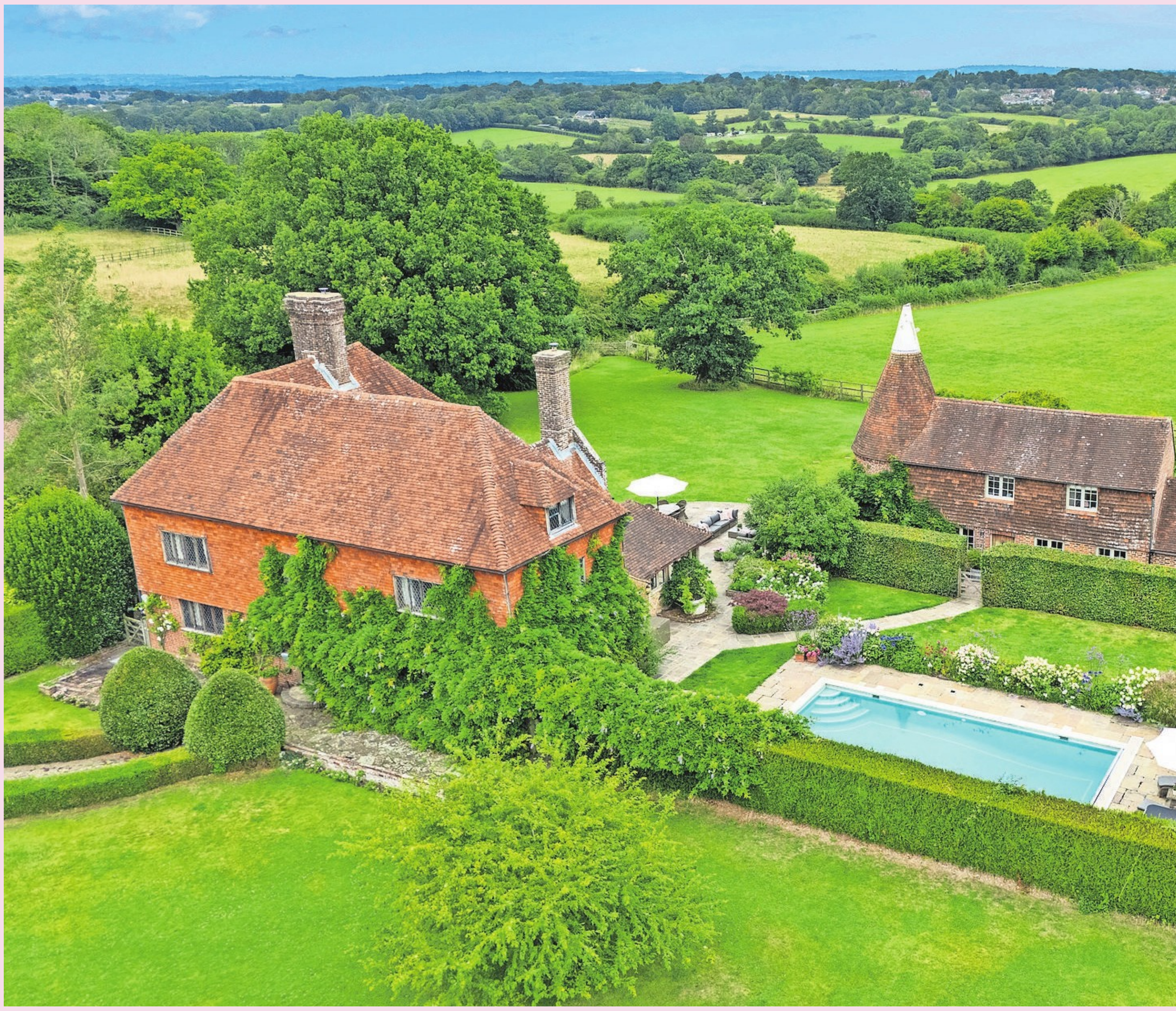
Making moves

House of the week

EAST SUSSEX £2.5M

A grade II listed house with seven bedrooms and 18 acres, plus period features such as exposed beams and inglenook fireplaces. Modern touches include underfloor heating and an Everhot range cooker. There is a swimming pool, kitchen garden and equestrian facilities in the grounds. The village of Palehouse Common, near the town of Uckfield, has a pub, church and memorial hall. **johndwood.co.uk**



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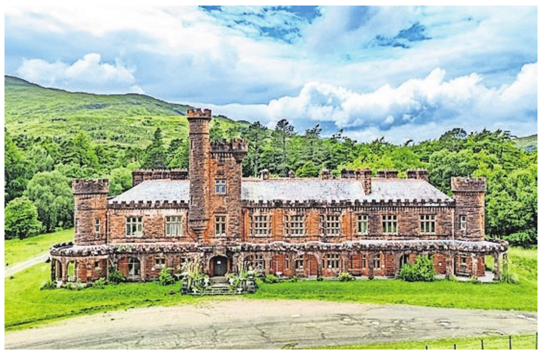
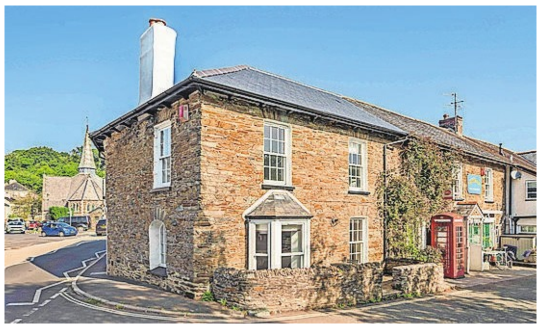
The best of this week's property on sale

COVER: VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES. THIS PAGE: VLADIMIR MELNIC; RICHARD DEAN



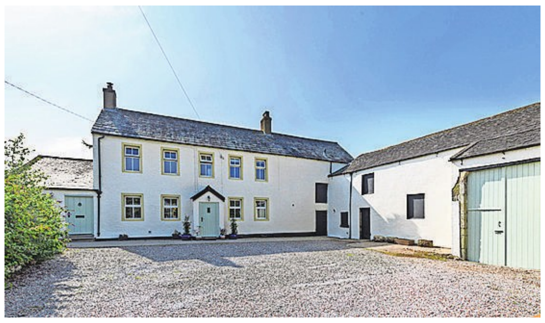
HIGHLAND 0/0 £750,000

On the Isle of Rum in the Inner Hebrides, the Edwardian Kinloch Castle is in need of total restoration. It overlooks Loch Scresort, and has 18 acres of gardens and woodland. **savills.com**



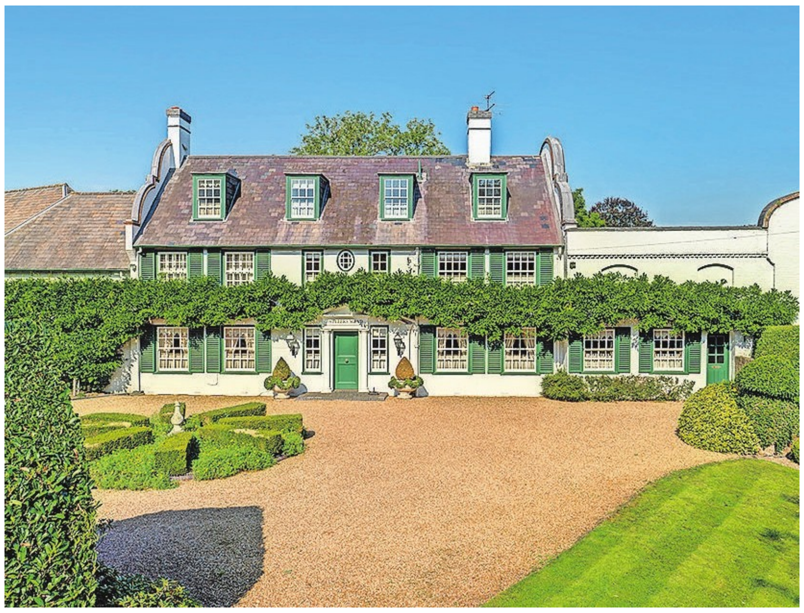
DEVON £300,000

Bridge House is a grade II listed four-bedroom cottage close to Totnes and the southern Devonshire coastline. The garden is on the banks of the Harbourne River. **marchandpetit.co.uk**



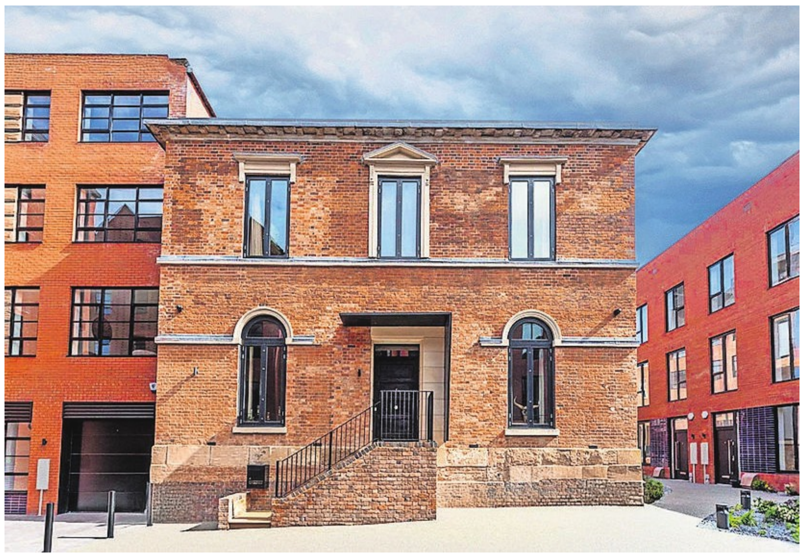
CUMBRIA £650,000

Midtown Farm near Cockermouth is a characterful four-bedroom period property with an attached barn. There are exposed beams, stone fireplaces and the barn could be converted. **finest.co.uk**



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE £3.55M

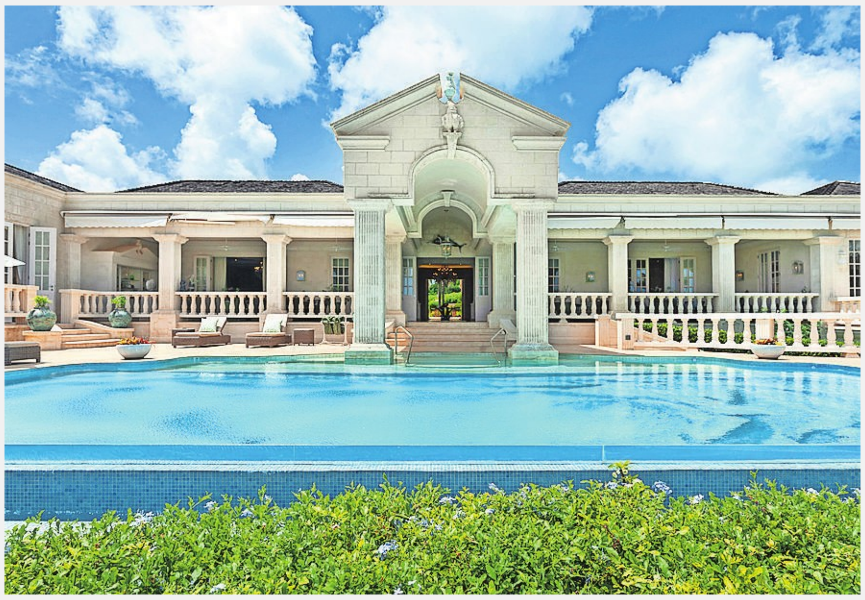
Set on the River Misbourne near Uxbridge, Wellers Mead is a former mill that was converted in the 1920s to become a family home with seven bedrooms — find a rotating Victorian summerhouse in the garden. **beauchamp.com**



BIRMINGHAM £1.5M

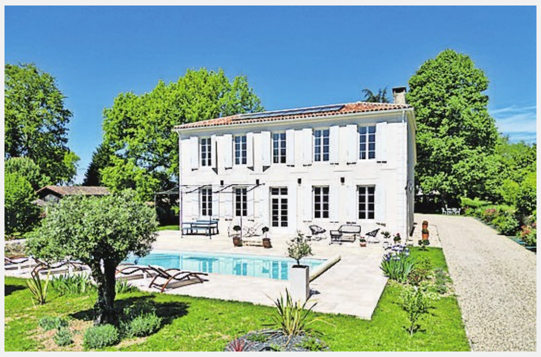
Heaton House is a five-bedroom Georgian villa in the city's Jewellery Quarter. Recently renovated, it has a fancy kitchen with Siemens appliances, clawfoot baths and a garage with an EV charging point. **fineandcountry.com**

International



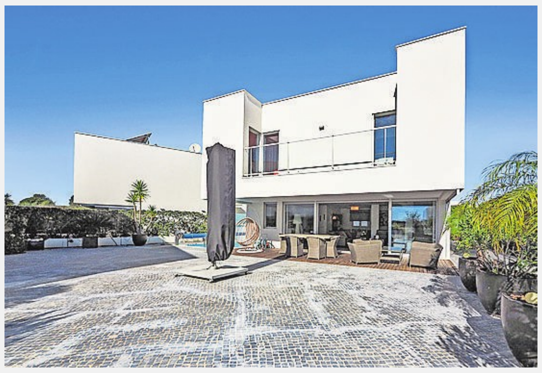
BARBADOS $12.5M

On the Platinum West Coast, this villa has soaring ceilings, four bedrooms, six bathrooms and 2.5 acres of landscaped gardens. The ground floor has a grand marble entrance hall with Baccarat crystal chandeliers, a formal dining room with stained glass elements, and a high-end chef's kitchen. Outside, there is a sun terrace, landscape gardens and a 40ft swimming pool with an ocean-themed mosaic and coastal views. Holetown, for restaurants, bars and shops, is a short drive away. **onecaribbeanestates.com**



FRANCE €780,000

A white four-bedroom villa with a sparkling outdoor pool in Sauternes, Gironde. Renovated by the present owners to be eco-friendly, it has solar panels and pellet-powered underfloor heating. **kyero.com**



PORTUGAL €695,000

Ferragudo is a scenic fishing village in the Algarve, and this one-bedroom condominium, with its own private, heated plunge pool, is close to the centre. **fineandcountry.com**

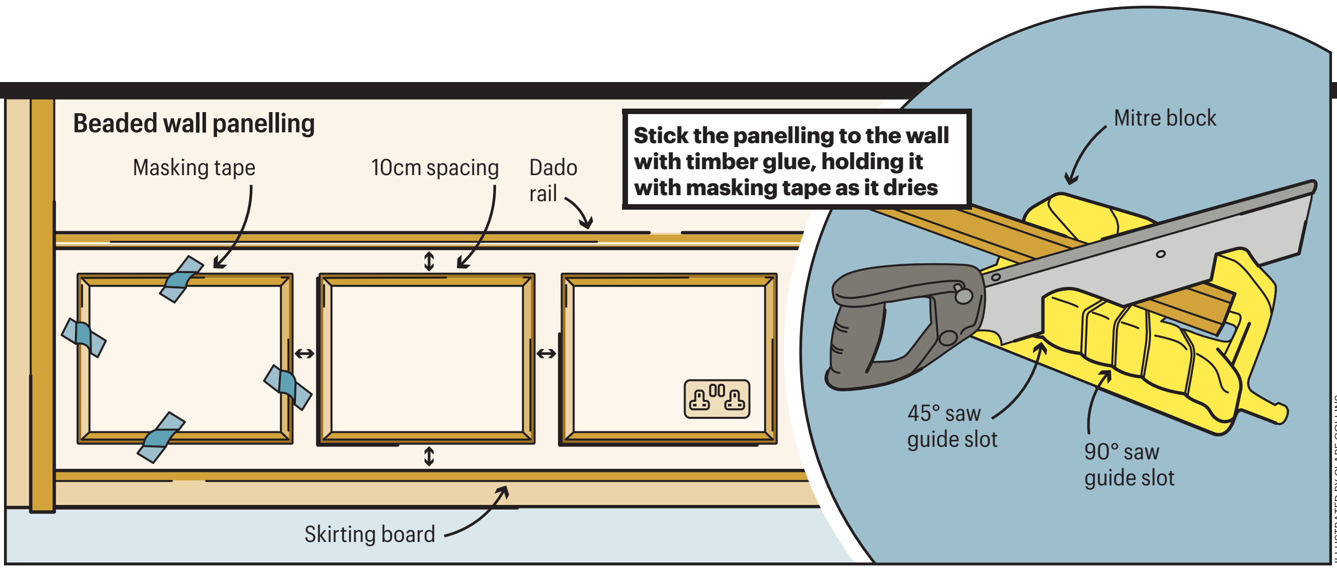
DIY Q&A

WAYNE PERREY

The TV Carpenter

How to add panelling

Q My house is painted white with no architectural features. I love the idea of adding panelling to the walls, particularly the hallway. Where do I begin?
Louise, Brighton



ILLUSTRATED BY CLARE COLLINS

A Panelling instantly adds drama to any plain wall. There are lots of different options, but one of the easiest to create is beaded panelling – which is strips of routed pine timber cut to size to create framed areas of interest.

The first thing you need to do is measure the wall's width and make a note of any plug sockets or fitted features such as radiators. When you design the layout of your panelling, you need to consider these measurements, as there's nothing worse than a strip of beading running through the centre of a plug socket. Also, think about the dimensions of your furniture – how perfect would it be if your bedside tables were positioned in a way that your new panelling framed them?

I like to be even with my panelling, so I make sure that the space above the skirting, down the sides and in between each rectangle panel is measured equally. This may take lots of planning, particularly in an area like a hallway, as you will have an opposite wall that will be seen at the same time.

Once measured, draw the outside edge of your panelling design on the wall to check you are happy with how it looks – now is your chance to make adjustments before cutting the wood.

To cut the beading, you need to buy a mitre block, which has 45-degree grooves in it that accommodate a hand saw and help you create perfect right-angled corners. When choosing your saw, make sure it is a "fine" timber saw – these have lots of small teeth that cut the beading with minimal splintering.

To attach the measured and cut beading to the wall, use the adhesive No More Nails. As the name suggests, you don't have to use any tools or fixings that could damage the beading. Put the glue on the back of the timber and stick it to the wall.

While the glue is setting, I recommend holding the beading to the wall using masking tape.

If any of your cut corners aren't perfect, don't worry – use some lightweight filler or decorator's caulk to fill in any gaps. Once painted, it'll look absolutely perfect, and I guarantee you'll be addicted to panelling. I have it in three rooms.

Follow Wayne Perrey at thetvcarpenter.com

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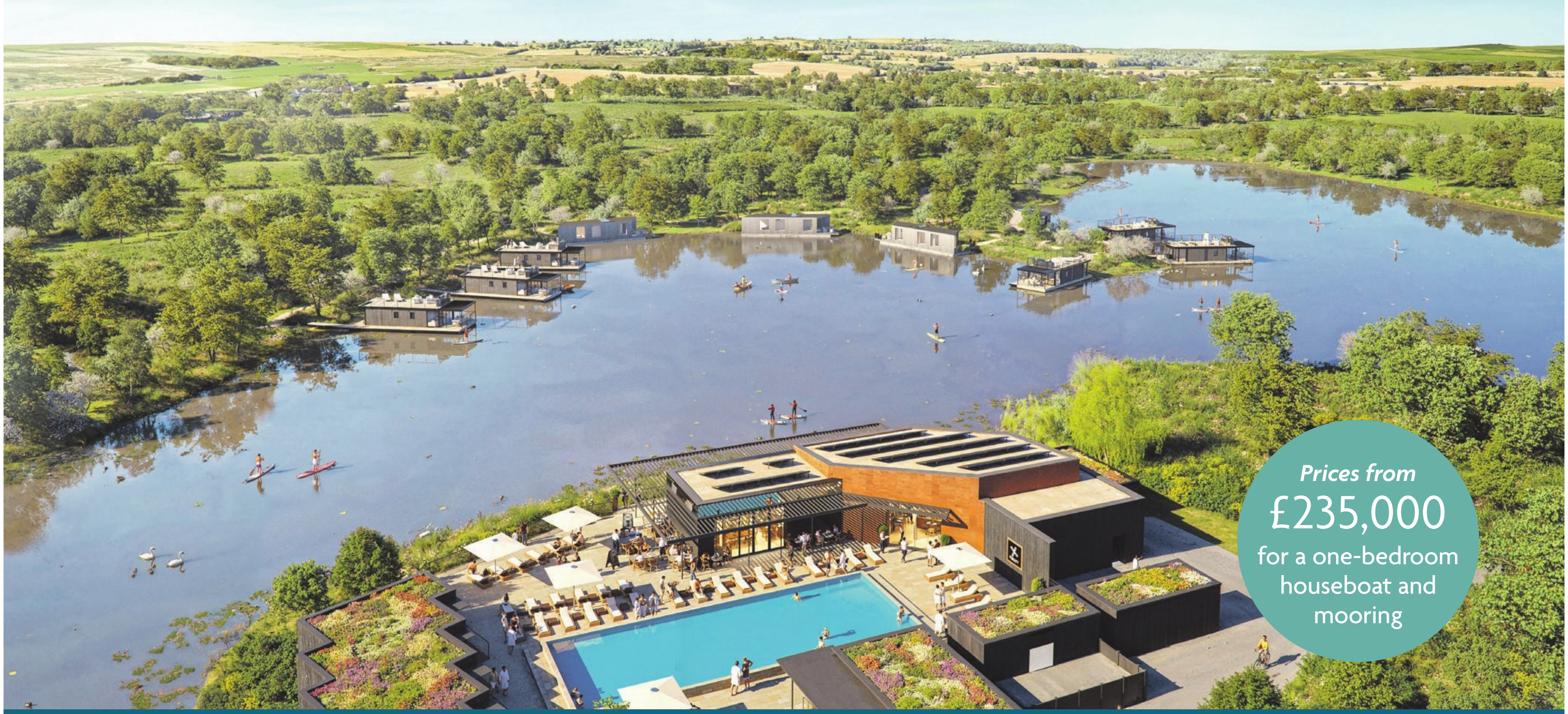
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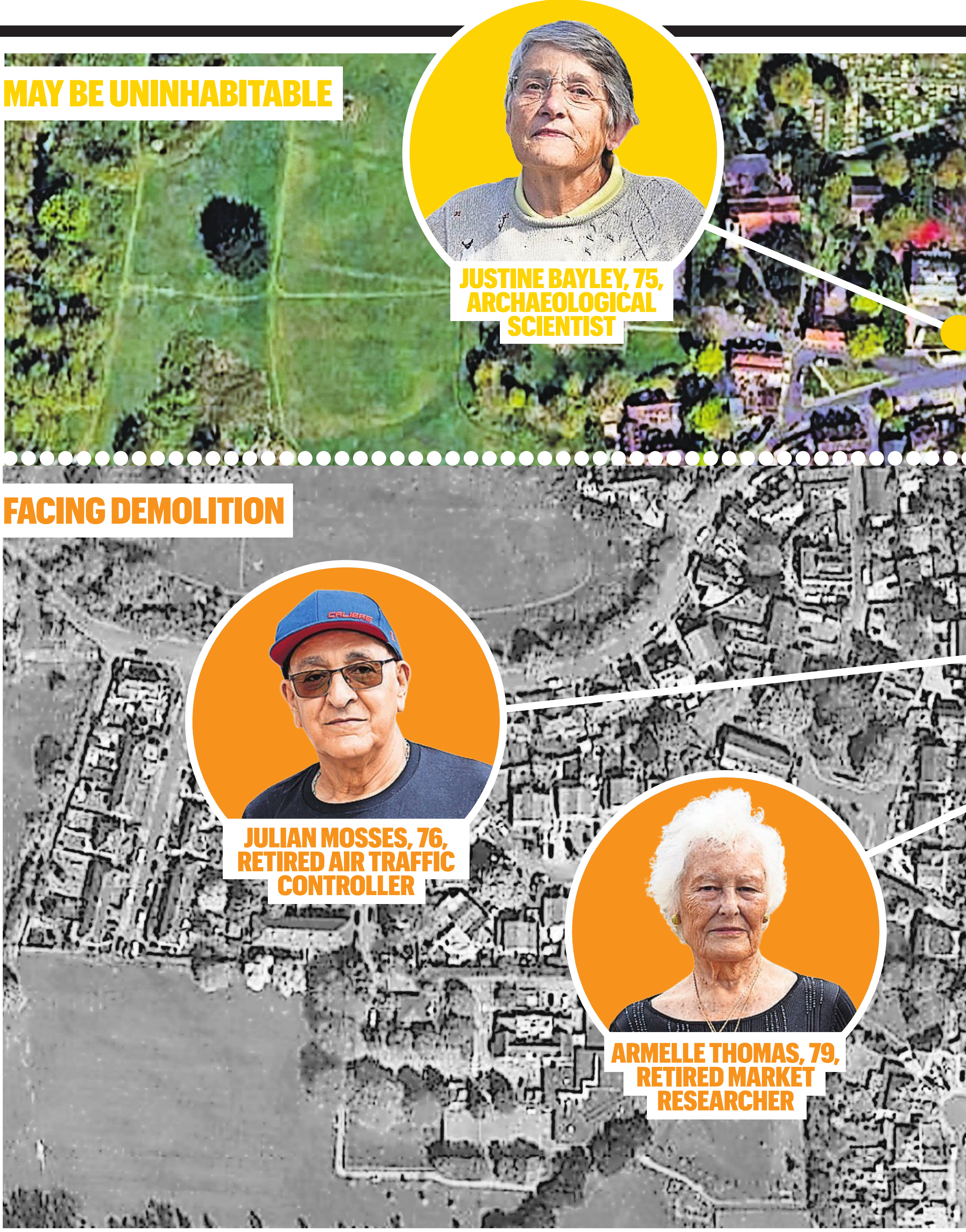
HOMES ON THE LINE

Some 752 houses are set to be demolished under Heathrow's £49bn plans. *Emanuele Midolo* meets the villagers affected


MAY BE UNINHABITABLE
JUSTINE BAYLEY, 75, ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCIENTIST
FACING DEMOLITION
JULIAN MOSSES, 76, RETIRED AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER
ARMELLE THOMAS, 79, RETIRED MARKET RESEARCHER

The quaint village of Harmondsworth, in the London borough of Hillingdon, close to the border with Berkshire, was mentioned in the Domesday Book almost a millennium ago. At the time of William the Conqueror's rule it had 24 villagers, six smallholders, seven cottagers, six slaves and generated about £20 a year.

The population and the number of homes here has since gone up slightly, but the 1,500 or so residents of this hamlet just north of Heathrow airport worry that their homes would be worth less than £20 if a third runway goes ahead.

And those who still had a house would be the "lucky" ones: the majority of them will be demolished.

Last month Heathrow submitted proposals for the £49 billion expansion, which would pave the way for 276,000 more flights and 66 million more passengers every year. The project includes a £1.5 billion "upgrade" of the M25, which would need to be rerouted and realigned through a tunnel passing under the 3.5km runway.

The plans follow an announcement from the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, in January, in which she declared the government was backing the project to "get our economy moving and secure the long-term future of the UK's aviation sector". (Sir Keir Starmer has had something of a Damascene conversion since voting against a third runway when in opposition in 2018.)

For Harmondsworth, which sits just above the existing north runway of the airport, the plans mean the village will effectively be split in two.

Some 752 homes and businesses south of the line would be demolished. But, as per the airport's own calculations, another 4,750 homes "on the wrong side of the road", both in Harmondsworth and other villages nearby, would be rendered uninhabitable owing to noise and pollution.

"This is the same government that claims they need to build more homes because there is a housing crisis," says Justine Bayley, 75, an archaeological scientist. Bayley, who is also the chairwoman of the Stop Heathrow Expansion campaign group, has been living here since 1992, when she bought a two-storey, three-bedroom detached house, parts of which date back to the 16th century.

It sits just north of the red line so it won't be bulldozed, but falls in the "uninhabitable" zone. "What they said was, if once we'd built the runway and it's operational, and you can't find a buyer for your house, we'd consider buying it under the same conditions as the compulsory purchase zone."

It's unclear how the airport will be able to evaluate what the market price in the area would be if the project goes ahead, especially since many of the residents bought their homes decades ago.

"I bought this house when a proposal had just been thrown out, there wasn't going to be a third runway so there was no problem," Bayley says, explaining that residents of Harmondsworth have been living with an ongoing threat since the 1950s. Plans to expand the airport have been on and off ever since. Boris Johnson, when he was a backbench MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip in 2015, famously pledged that he would "lie down in front of the bulldozers" if the runway was built because of the pollution it would cause.

When we visit the village in late August, the deafening roar of flights taking off can be heard continuously, but we can't see them. That's because, Bayley explains, planes take off on one runway and land on the other one, with the airport swapping takeoffs and landings between the north and south runways to reduce noise and pollution. Flights are now taking off from the south runway, which is out of sight. Bayley says that with a third runway this "respite" would likely cease.

Residents who'd had enough of this and, quite reasonably, wanted to sell, soon found out that they were stuck. "Nobody has been able to sell their houses for years," Bayley says. "No mortgage lenders will lend because of the uncertainty around the runway. Even if people find prospective buyers, the latter can't get a mortgage."

Perhaps predictably, the only houses that get sold are bought, in cash, by landlords who convert them into houses of multiple occupation. "That changes the look and feel of the village. Because those people are temporarily here, they just want somewhere to sleep. They don't care."

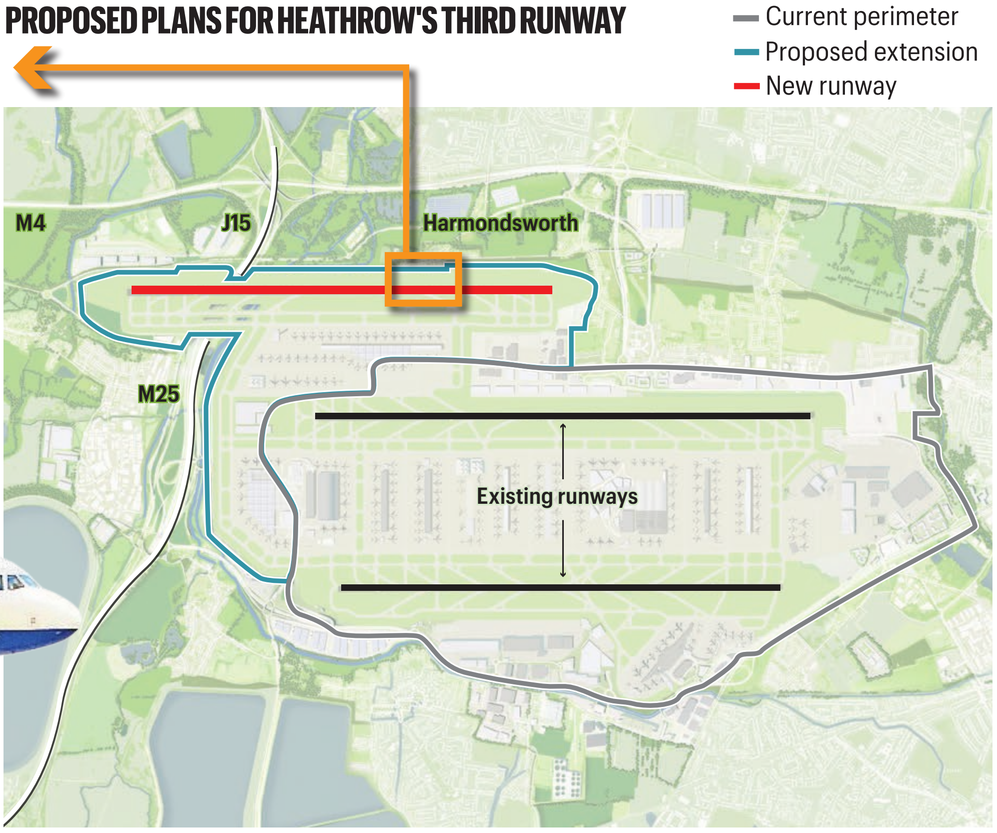
Heathrow already owns a few hundred properties in the area. Most are in the nearby village of Sipson, which was going to be targeted by initial plans for Terminal 5. The

> **The perimeter fence would be 15 yards away. And behind us would be the rerouted dual carriageway. How would we get anywhere?**

ANDREW MELVILLE, 72, RETIRED CONTRACT MANAGER
BRITISH AIRWAYS
G-EUYF
VERONICA RUMSEY, 70, RETIRED COUNCIL ADMIN

VICKI COUCHMAN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

PROPOSED PLANS FOR HEATHROW'S THIRD RUNWAY



airport bought the properties, but those plans were later scrapped and the terminal was built elsewhere. Heathrow rents the properties out to locals, many of whom work at the airport. There have been complaints from residents that they struggle to communicate with their landlord and can't get any repairs done.

The residents of Harmondsworth worry that their homes could also be seized for a project that never happens, wrecking their village, just as happened for the scrapped HS2 project between Birmingham and Manchester.

"That's just the way the government works," says Andrew Melville, 72, a retired contract manager in the oil and gas industry, and treasurer of the local church. His house sits practically on the red line drawn by the airport planners. "If you look at the artist's impression, there's a strip of property – that's where I live and the airport's perimeter fence would be 15 yards away," Melville says. "And behind us is going to be the rerouted A4 dual carriageway, which is four lanes. So how the bloody hell do we get anywhere?"

A possible reason the houses of Bayley and Melville will be spared is because they sit on the same side of Harmondsworth's 15th-century Great Barn, which is the largest timber-framed building in England. The poet John Betjeman called it "the cathedral of Middlesex". The barn is grade I listed, is owned by English Heritage and is therefore protected.

Stop Heathrow Expansion
stopheathrowexpansion.co.uk

Anti-Heathrow expansion posters in Harmondsworth

Heathrow's planners have drawn the line south of the barn. Bayley, who is also a member of the Friends of the Great Barn group, which manages the building, reckons the vibrations of the planes could still damage – if not destroy – it. English Heritage acquired the barn in 2012 to protect it from demolition.

Veronica Rumsey's house is south of the line and is therefore set for demolition. She is holding a bunch of flowers as she crosses the village square. "I was going to take them to my husband, who's in the graveyard." If they force her to move, she asks, who's going to put flowers on her husband's tomb?

"They don't care, they just don't care about us," says Rumsey, 70, who is retired. "The government is hellbent on doing it and they will shift heaven and earth. They will change every rule in the book to get it through. But if they don't get it through by the end of this parliament, I can't see it happening. It's been happening before. Oh, how many times have I sat through this? I've been living here for 52 years."

Another retiree who lives nearby, Armelle Thomas, 79, says she won't leave her home, even if the latest project ends up going through. "I won't be bulldozed on lies," Thomas says, holding a picture of her late husband, Tommy Thomas, a former RAF bomber during the Second World War and one of the founders of the British Airways predecessor BEA, who died aged 93 in 2015.

"My husband died because John Holland-Kaye [the former chief executive of Heathrow Airport] wrote us a letter to say we will be bulldozed. He died eight weeks later of a broken heart. It wasn't his age. It was what they did to him. Because he was leaving his wife of 46 years without a home, without a village, without a community." She adds: "I'm now 79, dying of cancer. How do you think I feel?"

> **“The government is hellbent on building the runway. They will change every rule in the book to get it through**

A Heathrow spokesman says: "We know how important it is to give certainty to anyone whose property may be impacted by expansion. While the government is still reviewing the expansion proposals, we are unable to share further details. If our proposal is brought forward, we intend to open a property scheme that would give neighbours most impacted the certainty they want, and we have committed to keeping residents updated."

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JAKUB WIERZBICKI

In the Sixties and Seventies Laura Ashley created Victoriana-inspired floral dresses. Above: the new Water's Edge collection. Below: early fabric and wallpaper from the archives

Tell Laura we love her

Victoria Brzezinski unearths the vast archive of Laura Ashley's designs hidden in an underground salt mine

Welcome to DeepStore, a sprawling storage facility tucked inside the UK's oldest and largest working rock salt mine, a chasm-like expanse of 1,400 acres carved out below undulating Cheshire countryside in Winsford.

After a 90-second descent, clad in high-vis jackets and hard hats, there's a lift-full of popped ears as the clanking mine shaft shudders to a halt at 150m below ground. The locked doors swing open to reveal Laura Ashley's bulging archive: a vault housing more than 100,000 precious pieces spanning more than 70 years of British design and fashion history.

You may deem the brand's sprigged florals deeply nostalgic or deeply naff, depending on your generation. Yet despite going into administration in 2020, it retains a cult following, and was last year relaunched under the Next umbrella.

Here, upon this uneven floor covered in a thin layer of pinkish dust, the heavy air is kept at a constant 15C. Laura Ashley's archivist Bronwyn Gaffney has been cataloguing all manner of items beloved of fans: clothing, fabrics and wallpapers, as well as reams of documents, artworks and crockery.

Ashley was born in the village of Dowlais, south Wales, on September 7, 1925. Inspired by a Women's Institute quilting exhibition at the V&A, she and her husband, Bernard, set up their enterprise (then called Ashley Mountney, a combination of their surnames) in their tiny flat in Pimlico in 1953, with an initial £10 investment to pay for the screens and dyes to produce their own prints.

Among early runs of napkins and tablecloths, one of Ashley's first designs (and the rarest, oldest piece in the archive) is the Pelham printed scarf, influenced by one Audrey Hepburn wore in the 1953 rom-com *Roman Holiday*.

Also on the archive's racks is the hand-painted gouache artwork for a 1992 tulip print, reworked for the brand's 70th anniversary; another swatch depicts a 1988 chinoiserie summer palace print, which was reused in the spring-summer 2025 collection. Photographs show Princess Diana wearing the brand's designs during the 1980s and Kate Moss modelling a frou-frou wedding dress sample in 1991.

> “
> **The 1970s was our heyday, where it really became global**

“We're always looking back as we look forward,” says Helen Ashmore, Laura Ashley's head of design. “[Using] the archival patterns is about pruning out bits that are less trend-led and changing the palette to bring new life to it. We might take one element from an old print and make something completely new or change its scale to contemporise it.”

In the 1950s the Ashleys set up their first studio on Cambridge Street in Pimlico and began selling their homeware in John Lewis and Heal's, before moving the factory to Kent in 1955. At one point the River Darent flooded, leaving the factory's contents in 3ft of water.

By the 1960s they had expanded into garments, with a gardening smock – which flew off the shelves after featuring in The Sunday Times. “It was always about the everyday customer,” Ashmore says.

In contrast to the mini-mania of Mary Quant, the Ashleys found their stride in fashion with Victoriana-inspired long dresses. “Ashley herself was not an artist,” Ashmore notes. “Her mark-making and the original prints were geometric; quite simplistic in their form. She directed the people around her as the business grew to deliver her vision.

“She was a feminist icon at the time,” Ashmore adds. “When the factory started it was always very local, very Welsh. If you had a child you could borrow a sewing machine and work from home.”

In 1961 the couple moved the business (and their four children) to Ashley's native Wales, working alongside locals such as Brian Jones from Newtown, Powys, who was hired as an artist in 1972 to translate Ashley's ideas to fabrics and wallpapers. The brand became a global design powerhouse, with a turnover of £25 million in 1979 (£124 million today). Ashley adored travelling, plucking inspiration from across the world – and as their success grew, she and Bernard bought homes in France, Florida and the Bahamas. “The 1970s was our heyday, where it really became global,” Ashmore says. “They were opening shops in Paris, Asia and all over the States.”

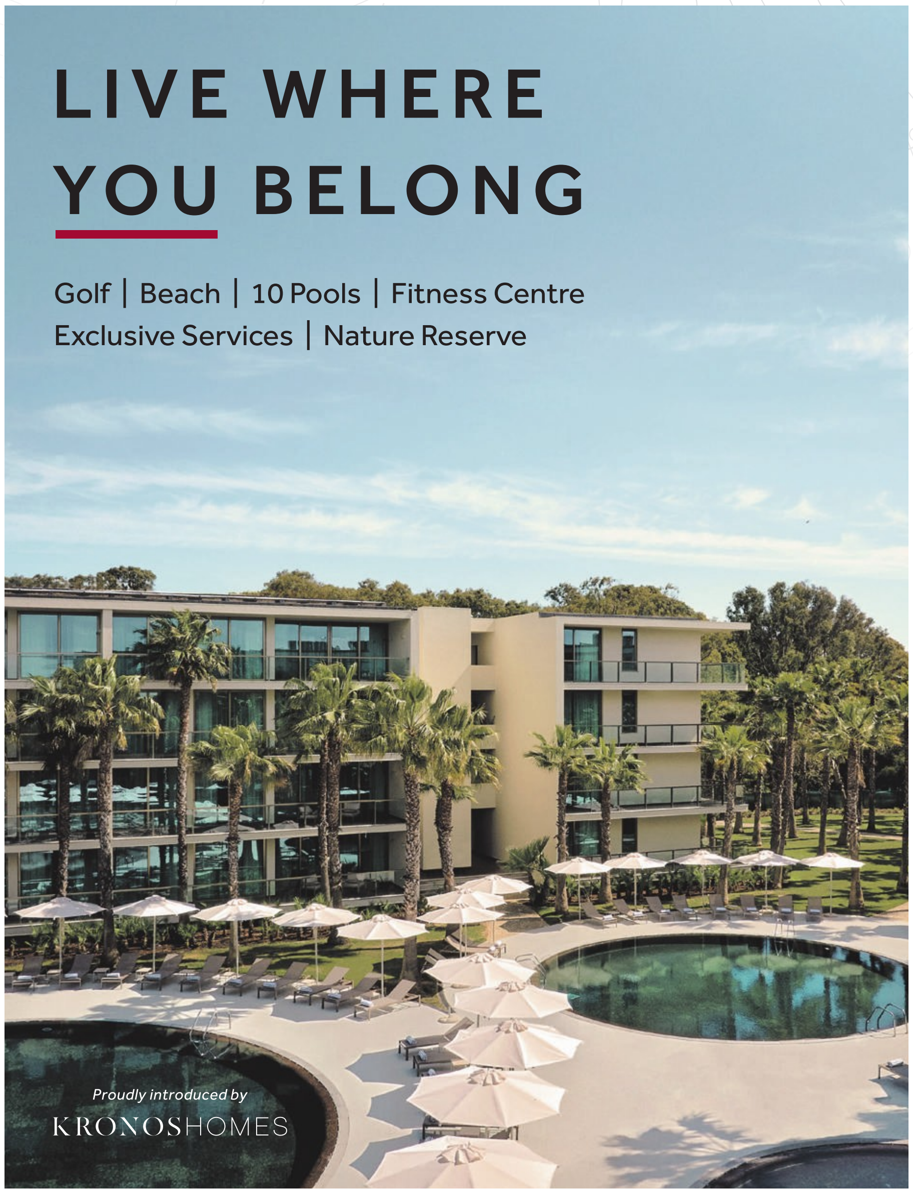
In 1985, at the height of their success, Ashley died of a brain haemorrhage.

Today, Ashmore and her team continue Ashley's work. “Everything is built to last. Some of our furniture has been in our ranges for upwards of 25 years. We're still using the same supplier base.”

Ashmore distils the different eras of Laura Ashley's life into design pillars. “We have a country aesthetic, which is based in [the couple's] rural Welsh home towns; our timeless collection is a little bolder, inspired by their Georgian townhouse in London. We then move on to our French romantic pillar, where they had their house in northern France. Lastly, we have our heritage design pillar, going back to those small-scale geometrics.”

Since its debut as a wallpaper and textile pattern in 2003, the Josette print – an ornate damask – has become the brand's bestseller, appearing on more than a hundred products, and available in six colour palettes and 19 colourways. In the past two years alone, 35,000 rolls of Josette wallpaper, 11,000 bed linen sets, 8,500 pairs of curtains and 20,000 pieces of nightwear have been sold.

This month marks what would have been the founder Ashley's 100th birthday and sees the launch of the Laura Ashley: 100 Years of an Icon collection in collaboration with the young designer Anna Eynon, a Swansea College of Art graduate. Her autumn-winter 2025 Water's Edge collection is a nod to the British wetlands and includes a statement mural and a complementary wallpaper. “That's what Laura would be doing now – she'd be finding that new design talent and nurturing them,” Ashmore says.



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BAN THE BEIGE
SNUG AS A BUG
1

Autumn homeware to fall for

From snazzy mugs at Dunelm to chic classics at Next – *Katrina Burroughs* selects her favourite high street pieces from the new season's collections

Just as the weather has turned autumnal the new home collections have hit the high street. From John Lewis to Primark, Habitat to H&M Home, retailers are launching payday pick-me-ups for less than a tenner as well as heirloom pieces to hand down to the kids. Say hello to the high street heroes of autumn/winter 2025.

DUNELM — BEST FOR SNAZZY ACCESSORIES

The nationwide home furnishings chain is a splendid source for good-quality bath and bed linen on a budget, for setting up a university room and kitting out a first kitchen. Basics aside, this season at Dunelm is all about colourful accessories, such as Sophie Robinson's twisted pillar candle holders, £10, and her Ban the Beige mug, £8 (**1**). Add pizzazz to the sitting room floor with the Retro Blocks carved wool rug, from £89 (**2**). And cheer up a bland bathroom with the new Elements Roberts plush towel, £16.

GEORGE HOME — BEST FOR DUPES

George Home, the interiors arm of Asda, always autumns hard (will readers moan if I use autumn as a verb? Summer is totally a verb. On the edge of my seat!). The collections this year, naturally, include innumerable pumpkin, skeleton and ghost-inspired merch, and oodles of cosy/whimsical pieces such as the Fancy a Brew cushion (**11**), £10.

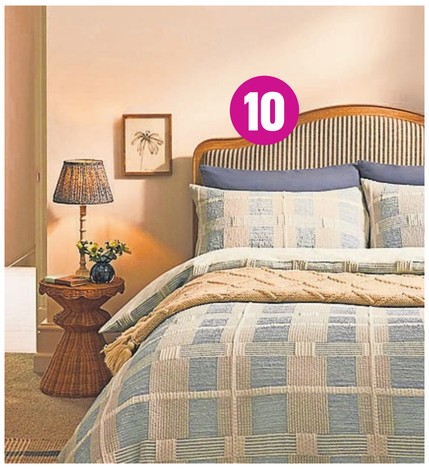
Pieces to watch out for are the inexpensive dupes that are likely to sell fast. The ones to add to basket asap include the Check jug vase, (**12**), £12,– a tartan jug that bears more than a passing resemblance to Matilda Goad's Squiggle jug (£75), and the All in One set of sage green pans that strongly resembles the viral Always pan by Our Place cookware. Coming next month, £58 for an All in One pan set (includes saucepan, £20, stockpot, £38, pan, £40, grill pan, £20). The original Our Place set costs £370 for the cookware plus bakeware bundle, fromourplace.co.uk.

PRIMARK — BEST FOR BUDGET LUXURY

If you missed the first instalment of the Edit (the Irish bargain brand's premium home range) this spring, grab your second chance to get acquainted with this clever take on everyday luxury. In the autumn collection colours are conservative; there is more texture than pattern in the new products. The 500-thread count embroidered bedding set costs £12 for a two-pack of pillowcases, and there's a camel-coloured Chevron throw, £45. Fringed velvet cushions will set you back £25. The palette is overwhelmingly neutral, with the option of bling in the form of gold striped art deco tableware (**7**) (side plates, £8, primark.com).

NEXT — BEST FOR CLASSIC BLUE AND WHITE

Brands that come under the Next umbrella include Laura Ashley, Made and French Connection, but this season its own-brand in-house designs are worth the closest look. There's a particularly covetable collection in blue and white, including the chenille stripe blue and white Lilly accent chair, £399; Simplicity checkered rug, from £110; and the quilted blue pattern duvet cover and pillowcase set, from £45 for a single. Serving suggestion for this pretty, classic range?



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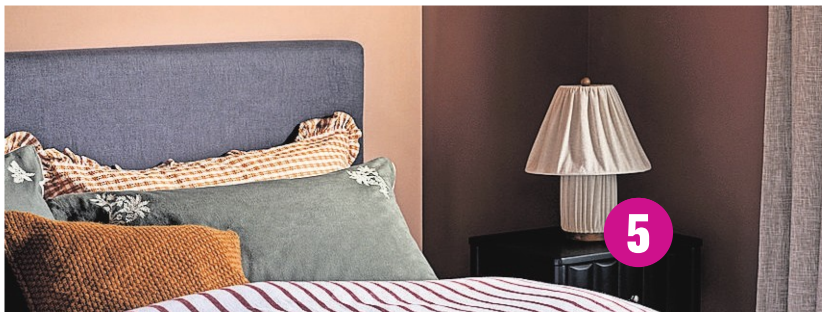

7
DO YOU FANCY A BREW?
11
ELEMENTAL
12

Avoid overcomplicating it with pattern and colour – just add some of Next's tactile woven furniture, such as the Natural rattan side table (**10**), £85.

HABITAT — BEST FOR SURPRISES (AND THAT LE CREUSET CLONE)

I bet you have Habitat filed neatly under "nostalgic mid-century modern vibe" – and you wouldn't be wrong. Plus, you no doubt know the brand as the source for the best of the Le Creuset dupes (5.3-litre casserole, now reduced to £29.99). But the collection develops and delights every season, so brace for surprising launches this year, including the woven Faro oak chair, £200 for a pair, the Chiltern spindle bed, an Ercol lookalike, £400, and the elegant Collins arched display cabinet, £350 (**3**), habitat.co.uk.

JOHN LEWIS — BEST FOR MODERN DESIGN

We rely on John Lewis for its made in the UK bedding, whether we need a basic Anyday 4.5 tog duvet for under £20 or aspire to that famous five-figure Icelandic eiderdown. But year on year the in-house team delivers ever more remarkable collections, until John Lewis has become a source for heirloom buys to rival the specialist design brands. In the Modern Luxe range, the star of this season, curves are key. The sinuous J-shaped sofa, Pleat, is particularly delicious in chocolate brown or ginger (**9**, from £1,849); a round burl walnut coffee table offers astonishing value at £399, and there are several glamorous spins on the domed lamp, including the green marble-based Porcini (**8**), £200, johnlewis.com.

MARKS & SPENCER — BEST FOR TABLE LAMPS

Over several seasons M&S has perfected the low-key modern country look, featuring layered colour and pattern, tactile fabrics and tableware – and this autumn the retailer has revealed a genius for the table lamp. Highlights of the new ranges include a rust and cream chenille geometric fringed cushion, £25, and a gingham bed set (**5**), £49.50 for king size. But the real stars are the table lamps: the geometric print fabric table lamp, £59 (**6**), and the soft pleated fabric lamp, £49.50, marksandspencer.com

H&M — BEST FOR GLAMOUR ON A SHOESTRING

The Swedish multinational routinely delivers sophisticated home decor at an affordable cost. Fancy a marble side table for £99.99? This is the store to supply it. Its textiles are outstanding, ceramics appear way more expensive than their price tags would imply, and occasionally H&M launches a decorative accessory that is destined to be a bestseller: this year, I'm predicting the metal candleholders (**4**) will fly off the virtual shelves (from £14.99). New-season cushion covers start at less than £10, including a corduroy option, available in burgundy, camel, cream, mustard and brown, £12.99; black reactive glaze tableware, £12.99 for two dinner plates, hm.com.

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CELEBS & THEIR PETS

I met my wife walking the dogs

The presenter Ben Fogle on his pets belly-flopping in Kate Humble's pond, why he wants a camel, and Humphrey the parrot – who laid an egg

The TV presenter and adventurer Ben Fogle, 51, grew up above his father's veterinary practice and has kept animals all his life. He lives in Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, with his wife, Marina, their two children and a range of pets.

What's your current roster of pets?
Two dogs: Storm, an 11-year-old black labrador, and Swift, a four-year-old white labrador. Then we have five horses: an old rescue pony, my wife's, daughter's and son's horses and one bought in the hope that I would ride her. I do ride and I like having them around, but I'm not really a horsey person. We also have two Indian runner ducks.

What were your first pets?
I grew up with golden retrievers. The first was Honey, and my mother met my father when she took her into his practice – he's a vet. Then Liberty and Lexington were my childhood dogs from age 11. They slept on my bed. They were my best friends. I wasn't a particularly social child. I wasn't academic, I was dyslexic, and the dogs brought consistency and contentment.

We also had some parrots, including an African grey parrot called Humphrey – until it laid an egg after ten years and became Humphretta.

Were the birds challenging?
They were. We would never have kept parrots, but they were abandoned at Dad's clinic and just became part of the furniture. They caused a massive amount of damage. Humphrey would fly on to the shelves and tear off the spines of books. When I was 24 I got my own first dog, Inca, a black labrador. My wife, Marina, had a brown lab/collie cross called Maggi. We met while walking them in the park.

How did that play out?
I would walk Inca every day in Kensington Gardens, and I spotted this very pretty girl running in red tracksuit bottoms with her super-fit dog. I was smitten from afar. Inca and I hid in the bushes to estimate where she might be running so we could bump into her. When Inca died I buried her little tag by the tree in front of which Marina and I first met.

Why do labradors appeal so much?
I like my personal space so I was looking for a breed that was happy cuddling up on you, but equally happy not doing that. Around children, I feel more confident with a labrador than most other breeds. I also like that they will come for a run or swim with you. The only shortcoming is their insatiable appetite.

What are the house rules?
We really don't have any, except that I don't like them coming in soaking wet and muddy. Dogs have priority on sofas. If Marina and I get drunk, the dogs end up sleeping on the bed with us and we have a terrible night's sleep.

What are the main costs of keeping the dogs?
We do the brushing, nail-trimming and deticking ourselves. The only outgoings are medicine and dog food. We don't give them a complicated diet, just Science dry food and a bit of our own cooking. Given that Storm eats her own poo, I don't think diet is going to make a massive difference.

I'm lucky having Dad to cushion veterinary costs. Inca had epilepsy and needed two expensive human medicines, which I bought from him. In all my years of having a pet, it was the most stressful period. I was constantly on edge when walking her.

We need to return to the poo-eating…
It's disgusting but it's common. Inca did it as well. I pick it up if I can, but she hides it. I sprinkle Tabasco sauce on it to put her off but I think it just makes it tastier.

Ben Fogle, above, with his labradors Storm and Swift. Below, with his wife, Marina, their two children and the family's horses and dogs

What are the most embarrassing antics your pets have indulged in?
When I first met Kate Humble, who I present *Animal Park* with, Inca went straight to her pet rats' cage, which nearly gave them heart attacks, then proceeded to belly flop in her garden pond with her beloved fish before trailing water through her house. I was mortified.

What's your favourite dog walk?
We go to Cornwall out of season so we can walk the dogs on the beach. I love the salty air and the way dogs dig in the sand. When I'm home I do two 60 to 90-minute walks a day with them in a round from our house. This time of year I love Thames walks and going for a swim with them.

Are dogs easier than children?
A lot easier. You get unconditional love in return for some walks and food. I find that binary relationship reassuring in this complicated world. Once the children leave home I would love to rescue dogs. But as a parent I made a decision, which some people don't understand, to have a dog from puppydom so I could have absolute reassurance in how it would behave with my children.

Could you love a cat?
I couldn't. I can't get close enough to them. When I was young we had a Maine coon cat, but I was allergic to her so she got rehomed.

What dog laws would you change?
My father and I both believe there should be a licence for everyone who has a dog, to put off people who get a dog on a whim then get bored of them.

You promote smart trackers for pets. Has it been useful?
I started using them because we lost Storm twice in the wooded areas where we walk, not for long but enough that I panicked. A Tractive goes on the collar and you can see on your phone where she is. It also shows how many steps she's done every day. Swift, our super-fit dog, has started appearing on the local leader board for steps and Marina is obsessed with getting her to No 1, which is funny.

What's your fantasy pet?
Having a camel at home as a companion for the horses would be a dream. I did a big trip with a camel across Oman. I ended up with broken ribs and scars but they are just so beautiful and comedic, especially Bactrian camels with big droopy lips.

My life would be incomplete without animals. As the children head towards leaving home, and as Marina seems to be collecting horses, I might start collecting dogs and retire with a flock of 20 labradors.

Interview by Caroline Rees

Ben Fogle is a brand ambassador for Tractive smart trackers for dogs and cats

French farce

A couple planned to quickly update their Normandy flat. But they didn't count on Gallic builders and bureaucracy

When it comes to renovating, a tiny space doesn't always equal a quick job. Marissa Cox, a Paris-based British interior designer, learnt this when the overhaul of her one-bedroom apartment in Rouen, northern France, limped on by eight frustrating months. "I think we just got really unlucky," she says, with a vast element of understatement.

Cox, who grew up in Canterbury and moved to Paris in 2013, rents in Montreuil, a suburb of the French capital, with her partner, Victor Mutel, an art director. Snapping up a small property in the historic Normandy city was a way of getting on the ladder. "The prices in Paris are so crazy," Cox says.

One hour and 15 minutes by train from Paris Saint-Lazare, Rouen is buzzing year-round thanks to itschocolate-box charm, gothic cathedral and status as the capital of impressionism. Cox felt an affinity on her first visit: "There's a lovely atmosphere and the timber buildings remind me of Canterbury. We fell in love," she says.

> **"The builder was juggling projects and didn't work for us for four months**

The idea was that a flat would pay for itself by being let on Airbnb. They found a 150-year-old flat, measuring 39 sq m (420 sq ft), near the railway station. They were seduced by its exposed timber frame and it was crying out for modernisation, which ticked off Cox's desire to manage a project from start to finish. "Because I haven't done any formal training in interior design, I wanted to embark on a gut renovation of my own before [doing] a client's," she says.

On getting the keys in August 2023, an estate agent put them in touch with a builder to modernise the property. Opening up the kitchenette to connect it to the living space (making the bathroom smaller in the process), installing a fireplace and rewiring should have taken three months. But progress was painfully slow, then it ground to a halt. The builder "was juggling other projects and in the end, stopped working for us for four months", Cox says. A plumber by trade, she believes he wasn't properly qualified. "He left a tube dangling in the kitchen, obstructing the door to the oven. When we questioned it, he was, like, 'I don't have another way of doing it.'"

Cowboy builders seemingly aren't the reserve of the British. So far Cox has been underwhelmed by the workmanship levels: "It's often done on the cheap, using budget materials and not finished to a great standard," she says.

Their knights in shining toolbelts came to the rescue via a marble artisan in Montreuil, who had to fix the vintage fireplace Cox had sourced, not once but twice. "The builder broke the section that goes along the front, so we had it fixed. And then Victor stepped on the top part … we just stood in the apartment crying," she says. The specialist also cut the marble worktop for the kitchen and put them in touch with installers in Rouen. A team of two brothers with decades of experience, they finished the job (while the original builder received a legal letter officially sacking him).

It was a stressful time, heightened by Cox undergoing IVF. The couple's loan allowed them to delay their repayments by six months, but that didn't stretch long enough. Keen to eke out their budget, she and Mutel spent almost every weekend from June to October 2024 painting.

Another cost-saver was using a prefabricated staircase kit, which Cox reckons saved them €4,000. However, attempting to stain it the same colour as the wall beams was a "disaster"; Mutel then had to rectify it alone because the new paint was too toxic for Cox to inhale while trying to conceive (she gave birth in July this year). "It was a lot to juggle, I'm just glad that both of those things are now over," she says.

It was all worth it: the result is a cosy destination unlike anything on offer in the city. "The idea was to create a luxury hotel room within an apartment. We did research and there's no boutique hotel here, and a lot of the Airbnbs aren't beautifully decorated. It's very basic, very Ikea. Of course, there's nothing wrong with Ikea if you dress it up a little," says Cox, who used the Swedish retailer's kitchen frames and jazzed them up with fronts from Plum Living.

She has a following on Instagram through sharing snippets of her life via the handle @ruerodier and is no stranger to brand partnerships. So, by creating a presentation deck with Mutel (in English and French), they pitched to premium homewares brands, inviting them to furnish the flat. That explains the elegant Nordic Knots rug, Gotain curtains and textiles by Toast, all of which guests can shop for via QR codes detailed in the apartment's catalogue. It's a savvy move, which helped with the budget and means high-end touches in return for exposure. "We've been lucky enough to stay in some really gorgeous hotels and Airbnbs, and often we're admiring pieces and wanting to know where they're from, so that was the concept," Cox explains.

The paints are all Farrow & Ball. The taps are courtesy of Margot, a French brand that supplies luxury hotels. "What better way for somebody to test a product without buying than to actually stay somewhere and use it?" she says of the queen-size mattress and sofa-bed provided by Kipli. Cox likens it to a liveable showroom, the idea being that in six months another brand might want to supply the crockery or glassware. Her approach is to balance new pieces with vintage treasures, so there are lighting fixtures and mirrors from the online marketplaces Selency and Etsy, and accessories from brocantes (flea markets).

The project, which was due to be completed in March 2024 but rolled on into November that year, has proved a steep but essential learning curve. Cox is now confident in briefing builders in her second language and has expanded her range of French *vocabulaire* when it comes to conveyancing.

Madame Capitaine – as the flat has been christened in honour of Mutel's grandmother's nickname and Rouen's maritime heritage – has since welcomed its first Airbnb guests. Costing an average of €83 a night (excluding cleaning), a local concierge service manages bookings and housekeeping. A positive review and five-star rating have set it on the right track. The couple are now able to enjoy relaxing in their hard-earned bolt hole.

"We've already stayed about five times and we sleep really well – probably better than we do at home," Cox says.

By Olivia Lidbury

Marissa Cox, top, and her partner, VIctor Mutel, in the living room of their renovated Rouen flat. The prefabricated staircase in the main living area, far right, leads up to the cosy bedroom, right

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From fussy to fuss-free

After 40 years of pruning, one couple needed a break – so they enlisted the help of a Chelsea gold-winning garden designer. By *Sharon Smith*

From top: the updated pond; low-maintenance planting; John and Bridget Ramsay

CHRIS RADBURN FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

When they moved in 39 years ago, planting 40 rose bushes seemed like a good idea to Bridget and John Ramsay. Wind forward to 2021 and the roses, in a pristine garden of vast lawn and herbaceous borders, were being viewed in a different light.

"We gardened happily for years, then we realised we couldn't carry on like that because it was too much work," says Bridget, now 79. "The work had grown and grown, particularly because we grew a lot of annuals," says John, 76. In addition, the Ramsays had a half-acre paddock to maintain.

They had created the garden themselves out of bare earth and a vegetable patch when they bought the house, choosing a cottage style to suit their 18th-century thatched property. They kept it immaculate to participate every June in Chelsworth Open Gardens in Suffolk.

For years before they retired, they worked as management consultants in London during the week and spent weekends at their Chelsworth house keeping on top of the garden, including "working like beavers" from March onwards for the opening. Deadheading, pruning, planting, watering, cutting back and mowing made it a high-maintenance space.

> "It's OK if things flop over or get eaten, or if you don't deadhead

They also had a pond, "which turned out to be much more work than you'd think. At the end of October each year, somebody had to wade into it and get the leaves and weeds out," John says.

In 2021 they asked Tom Hoblyn, a Chelsea gold-winning garden designer, for help. At the time, they were unaware of his credentials, selecting him purely because he lived locally. For Hoblyn, a lower-maintenance space meant replacing the pristine lawn and beds with a far looser style.

To show them what he meant, he invited them to view his own sustainable, naturalistic 2.5-acre garden. "I needed them to get on board," he says. "John likes things very orderly, neat and crisp, and I wanted to make sure they understood it is OK if things get eaten or flop over, or if you don't deadhead. I said, 'Before you sign up with me you need to agree this is what I'm going to give you.'"

The Ramsays liked Hoblyn's garden and agreed to a change of direction. First, he tackled the lawn and vegetable patch. "You have to cut a lawn 30 times a year, so that's your highest-maintenance area after a vegetable garden," says Hoblyn, 62.

The Ramsays wanted to retain some grass so Hoblyn drastically reduced the lawn into a meandering path, 3m wide, which takes 15 minutes to mow. He reduced a large vegetable patch situated 35m from the house into four raised beds and relocated it to the kitchen door. "Now, we're much more likely to nip out and pick something than we were before," John says.

Out too went the regimental beds packed with delphiniums, cosmos, peonies, penstemons, marigolds – and the roses. "Oddly enough, we have more beds now than when we started. Which was a little startling because I'd assumed that less work equalled more grass," John says.

The difference is that the new, scattered beds are stocked with easy-care plants. Ornamental grasses including molinia, pennisetum and miscanthus are used throughout. In beds on the shadier side of the garden they mingle with ferns such as athyrium and asplenium, and epimediums. On the sunnier side, they are interspersed with rudbeckias, heleniums, teucriums and lavender. The Ramsays had never grown grasses before. "They look lovely," Bridget says. "We have a lot giving flower spikes in the summer that survive the winter and look fabulous if we have a frost. And they move in the wind."

Hoblyn removed thick shrubs to reduce the workload and open up views on each side. He replaced a hedge with a post and chain fence overlooking a farmer's meadow, and cut down laurels on the right to reveal the neighbours' arboretum.

The pond stayed. "A proper pond will self-maintain," Hoblyn says. He replanted it, avoiding spreaders such as Norfolk reed and water soldiers. "It's about putting in plants that will behave but colonise enough to stop unwanted things getting in."

The garden's fertile silty loam soil is due to the River Brett that runs alongside the former paddock and is prone to flooding. This made the paddock unsuitable as a wildflower meadow, so Hoblyn planted bulbs including daffodils, camassias, snowdrops and snowflakes.

In the spring, the Ramsays, who have a gardener come in for three hours a week, prune overgrown shrubs and have one big "chop and drop" of grasses and perennials, leaving the cuttings as mulch.

"One of the benefits of the redesign has been to change the way we think about the garden," John says. "To accept that it's just as neat if we blow leaves onto the beds and chop and drop. I hate to admit this, but I care less about the edges of the beds now. It looks fine."

They prefer it to their former garden. "It feels more coherent, it flows down from the house around various beds into the dark corners at the bottom. It's much more interesting," Bridget says.

Most importantly, they now have time to just sit and enjoy the views.

"Lower maintenance is an attitudinal thing. Simply saying to yourself, 'I will be different, I will care less, I will not mow the lawn so often, I won't mind about the edges not being straight,' doesn't work," John says. "You do it for a bit, but it doesn't work because the garden, your expectations and your habits are the same. The redesign has changed everything about where we were focusing. If you want to change your habits you need to change a lot of stuff around you."

Lowering your workload as you get older, then, requires a change of attitude.

TIME AND SPACE HUGH FEARNLEY-WHITTINGSTALL

‘I swim with frogs and dragonflies’

The River Cottage chef on swapping a 17th-century farmhouse for a modern home

MATT AUSTIN; ARTHUR EDWARDS/NEWS GROUP NEWSPAPERS

I live in east Devon, just outside a pretty town called Colyton, with my wife, Marie, and our youngest child, Louisa. Our other three children – Chloe, Oscar and Freddie – have grown up and moved out. Our home is on a smallholding of 34 acres, ten of which is old oak woodland, with a stream running through it. We have a fantastic view across the valley. It is a very magical place.

What attracted you to your home?
We used to live in west Dorset. Marie was working in Exeter for the NHS, which was a bit of a slog to travel to. We had half an eye out for a move, and we saw this property in an estate agent’s window about 17 years ago. At the time we were living in a 17th-century thatched farmhouse with a lot of history. Our home now is quite different. It’s about 30 years old. It’s made of oak and glass, and it was designed by the architect Roderick James.

What prompted the change from an old to a new property?
We did ask ourselves whether this was really us but we looked at it in early May, when the bluebells were out in the woods, and the view from the house was incredible. We could see exactly where we’d put our veg patch and plant our fruit trees. It was just one of those places where you knew it was right.

How have you made it your own?
We have slowly put our stamp on the place, season by season. There was a very overgrown pond at the bottom of the field behind the house with a fallen tree in the middle of it. We got rid of that and got a digger in to make the pond bigger to draw in the dragonflies, frogs and tadpoles. Luckily, at 50-60ft deep, it also turned out to be a great swimming pond.

How did the River Cottage concept come about?
River Cottage is a real cottage in west Dorset that I started renting back in 1996. I was still working in London and was looking for somewhere to escape to on the weekends and holidays. I’d been visiting there for a couple of years before I got the idea for the *River Cottage* TV shows. I thought they’d be a one-summer fun show, but we made the *River Cottage* series for 15 years straight.

Do you still have River Cottage?
River Cottage is now our cookery school, restaurant and dining event spaces, just outside Axminster. It’s a different property, but we took the name with us. On another small farm, which is slightly bigger than my home at about 65 acres, we have River Cottage headquarters. It’s about 15 minutes from where I live. We have an amazing vegetable garden there, along with the chickens, cows and sheep.

From top: Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall; touring River Cottage with the King and Queen; hens on his farm

Did reading philosophy and psychology at the University of Oxford influence your career?
Some of the things we studied on the course did fold into what I do, in particular the campaigning work, such as with River Action. Many an ethical conversation is to be had about how we feed ourselves and look after the land, or how we fail to look after the land.

Are you good at switching off from work when you’re at home?
I’m better at it now than I used to be. About 15 or 20 years back, I got in a right old pickle with a book deadline and ended up working through our family summer holiday, which didn’t go down massively well. I was frustrated to have got myself into that situation, and I took the whole of the next August off. Ever since, I have taken a big chunk of the summer off, at least three weeks, and I try to clear as much of the kids’ holidays as possible.

How do you relax away from work?
It’s ironic that throughout the River Cottage shows I was encouraging people to grow more vegetables and go fishing, forage and connect with nature, when I was barely finding time to do any of it myself. If I can’t take time off to enjoy the things that I’m telling other people are so special and enjoyable, that makes no sense. Now my wife and I spend a lot of time together in the garden and the veg patch, or down at the coast for a walk, or just grabbing a few minutes before the working day begins to sit outside with a cup of tea and listen to the birdsong.
Interview by Dan Moore

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall supports the RiverAction campaign group. His latest book, How to Eat 30 Plants a Week, is available from timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Discount for Times+ members

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HOME HELP

HOW CAN I STOP A SAPLING FROM DAMAGING MY DRAINS?

Q Outside our property we have a drain that takes water from the property roof guttering. Where the drain butts up to the concrete path, a sycamore weed is aggressively growing through the joint. It’s impossible to dig up and remove. What is the best way to remove it as I’m worried the roots could damage the underground drains and possibly house foundations?
Mr J, Yorkshire

A Sycamore trees seed prolifically, and the seedling will enjoy the access to water, the crack providing air and soil nutrients below the concrete. As plants grow, the roots subdivide, flourishing where their needs are met for the least effort. Roots thicken as they lengthen and push strongly against obstacles. We can see this in uneven pavements and cracks in walls near trees. It’s best to kill this sapling now rather than have a problem in the future.

Pulling up a sapling with a mass of roots in a crack in the concrete is hard, if not impossible. In this case, I recommend using a chemical approach. As the sapling is near a drain, use one approved for use near water. There are chemical herbicides available in garden centres but check they are safe to use near drains. Follow all precautions and methods on the label.

As this is one sapling, and near your house, there are “homemade” solutions. Even though they are not branded as chemicals, precautions are needed to protect you, your pets, your property and the environment. Check local environmental regulations before using any treatments near drains. As I’m not clear on the specific circumstances of your case, I’d recommend consulting a qualified arborist or your local council’s environmental department for guidance on the safest approach for your particular situation.

Whatever you choose, homemade or purchased, shake or blow any insects away from the plant first. Wear rubber gloves, protect your skin and eyes, and wear a simple mask. First cover the area with a tarp/thick plastic around the plant to stop pets or wildlife from licking the concrete. Afterwards, cover the sapling with more plastic and, once the sapling is dead, wash any residual spray/salt away.

Be aware that the homemade methods below may cause unintended damage to metal drains and concrete over time, so they are not to be repeated.

Salt: Scratch or make holes in the trunk and pack rock salt around the seedling. Water to help the salt go down to the roots. Do not repeat this method, and use the minimum amount, as salt can damage concrete.

Vinegar mix: Mix one litre of white vinegar, three large tablespoons of salt and three teaspoons of washing-up liquid, put in a spray bottle and spray onto the leaves (make sure it doesn’t spread). Use the minimum amount to cover the plant. Keep an eye on the crack, and fill in with concrete to prevent this from happening again.

Sharon Durdant-Hollamby, independent chartered arboriculturist

Readers’ clinic

Q I recently bought a new pair of dark blue denim jeans and want to maintain this colour. How do I do this?
Clive Johnson, Suffolk

Denim rarely needs washing but when it does, immerse your jeans in cold or lukewarm water using a few drops of Woolite, and wash by hand to preserve the colour. Alternatively, a hand-held steamer will freshen the look.
Rosemary Morton Jack, Oxfordshire

Submerge new ones in a solution of salt water. Leave for at least an hour. Rinse, then wash in cool water. Tesco Colour Liquid Detergent should help in further washes.
Elizabeth, Hoylake

Always wash them inside out with other dark clothing and use a colour detergent.
Lindsay Marsh, Suffolk

FUTURE QUESTION

Our carpet reeks of dog urine. How do we get rid of the smell?
Rachel Watson

Send tips and questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice given without responsibility

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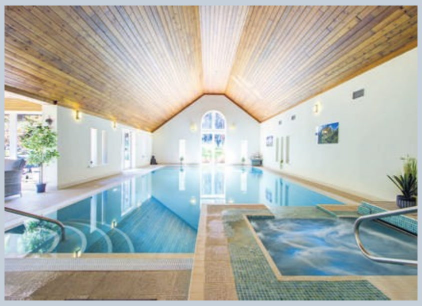

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The owner's favourite room

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Contact: 01665 200080
EPC: D&C | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold
OIRO £3,000,000

GONALSTON NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

Exceptional Grade II Listed rectory with beautiful gardens and a luxury leisure suite, set in a sought after Nottinghamshire village.

EPC Exempt | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold *guide price*
Contact: 01159 822824 £2,500,000

HENLEY-ON-THAMES OXFORDSHIRE

A once in a lifetime opportunity to own a distinctive country home rich with original features and steeped in local history.

EPC: F | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold *guide price*
Contact: 01491 352552 £2,500,000

GUILDFORD SURREY

Built in 1508, this Grade II Listed home blends period charm with modern living. Set in a private rural location, Hook Farm is reached via a long driveway.

EPC: E | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold
Contact: 01483 600844 £2,500,000

LEEDS WEST YORKSHIRE

A rare opportunity to acquire an exceptional double fronted detached family home, which has been meticulously refurbished and extended throughout.

EPC: C | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold *offers over*
Contact: 01132 034939 £2,000,000

KINGSWOOD SURREY

Russian Cottage was imported from Russia in 1869 and is thought to be the only original Russian cottage in the country, offering 3,263 sq. ft. of accommodation.

EPC: D | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold
Contact: 01737 361014 £1,695,000

CHIGWELL ESSEX

A remarkable Grade II Listed detached house, tucked away in a quiet cul-de-sac on a 1.01 acre plot, retaining many period features throughout.

EPC: E | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold
Contact: 02084 180018 £1,650,000

RYARSH KENT

A distinguished four bedroom period residence with five versatile reception rooms, set within gardens and grounds extending to over an acre.

EPC: E | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold *guide price*
Contact: 01732 222272 £1,550,000

SWANLEY VILLAGE KENT

A Grade II Listed five bedroom country house with charming period features, an annexe and a double cart barn with former planning consent to convert, set within 0.86 acres.

EPC: E | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold *OIEO*
Contact: 01959 588900 £1,500,000

BRENTWOOD ESSEX

An elegant 1930s home in a private setting in the heart of Brentwood, offering around 3,000 sq. ft. of versatile living space, a short walk to the station, town centre and schools.

EPC: D | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold *guide price*
Contact: 01277 714044 £1,500,000

PONTARDDULAIS SWANSEA

Set within approximately 5 acres, this impressive country home offers the perfect rural retreat, equestrian haven or family residence.

EPC: E | Council Tax: H | Tenure: Freehold *guide price*
Contact: 01792 367301 £1,000,000

FRESHWATER ISLE OF WIGHT

This architect designed home combines modern luxury with seclusion. Set within expansive gardens, it seamlessly blends indoor-outdoor living.

EPC: C | Council Tax: A | Tenure: Freehold
Contact: 01983 520000 £975,000

MACHYNLLETH GWYNEDD

Pennal Towers is a captivating 19th Century Italianate-style residence, set within approximately 22 acres, nestled in the heart of Pennal.

EPC: F | Council Tax: G | Tenure: Freehold *OIRO*
Contact: 01938 531006 £925,000

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THE SUNDAY TIMES
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Seven of the best UK city breaks for autumn

Don't be disheartened by the end of summer, book a weekend away in one of these leafy locations

There are plenty of places in the UK that are perfect for an autumn city break, the cooler weather being ideal for strolls around the sights and all those top-notch coffee shops to duck into when the weather turns. From their historic landmarks to their unique food scenes, each metropolis has much to discover – here are some great cities to visit this autumn.

YORK

Leaves are turning amber along the River Ouse, market stalls beckon along the famed Shambles alley and marshmallow-topped mochas are starting to look very tempting. They're served, most unusually, in a medieval barbican at Gatehouse Coffee (coffee from £2; instagram.com/gatehousecoffee); while chocolate-themed tours are inspired by the history of the Rowntree confectioners at the whimsical York's Chocolate Story (tours £16; yorkschocolatestory.com). This city also embraces the shorter days with ghost tours and spooky attractions, ideal in the run-up to Halloween – try the Shadows of York walk for tales of torture, blood and guts (£12; shadowsofyork.co.uk); or head for the creepy-comical York Dungeon for an immersive caper (from £19; thedungeons.com). Stay at the central Judges Court hotel, where luxury comes courtesy of rolltop tubs and four-poster beds.

Details Room-only doubles from £131 (judgescourt.co.uk)

GLASGOW

Golds and russets line your path through the 85-acre Kelvingrove Park, while an unpretentious, indoor food and art scene peps up drizzly days. Start with the free-entry Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, where you might spot a Van Gogh portrait, a taxidermied leopard or a 16th-century suit of armour in the 22 themed galleries. There's yet more leaf-peeping at Glasgow Green and Pollok Country Park. Contemporary restaurants such as Stravaigin in Kelvinbridge have soul-warming menus – try burrata with sherry fondue or a mussel rendang broth (mains from £17; stravaigin.co.uk). Stay at the minimalist Z Hotel close to the Buchanan Street shopping district.

Details Room-only doubles from £74 (thezhotels.com)

BATH

Compact and strewn with independent bookshops and wine bars, Bath is one of our best cities for combining culture and cosy corners once the summer crowds have dispersed. Start with the handsome Abbey (£8; bathabbey.org), a tour of the intriguing Roman Baths (from £26; romanbaths.co.uk) or a Jane Austen-themed walking tour (£150 for up to six; strictlyjaneausten.com). Autumn foliage can be found in the much-photographed residential spot the Circus, framing Pulteney Bridge, or the Botanical Gardens, after which you should settle in at one of the city's many pubs with crackling fires – try the Crystal Palace or Marlborough Tavern. Take the waters like an Austen character by booking a slot at the modern Thermae Bath Spa (£42.50; thermaebathspa.com) or book a room (spa access included) at the Gainsborough hotel – the facilities are modelled on the Roman Baths.

Details Room-only doubles from £208 (thegainsboroughbathspa.co.uk)

> “ Harcourt Aboretum sings with autumn foliage

OXFORD

It's no secret that the hallowed colleges and sketchbook spires of Oxford are cushioned by many leafy streets and parks. Autumn is calm after the summer tourist crush and there's a convivial feel as students return for Michaelmas term. Indoor curiosities abound for drizzly days: you can explore colleges including Magdalen, New College and Christ Church for a small fee (ox.ac.uk) before making for the esteemed Ashmolean, one of the world's oldest museums (free; ashmolean.org). Oxford does a good line in indie coffee shops, including Missing Bean (themissingbean.co.uk), as well as hole-in-the-wall restaurants, such as the candlelit Pierre Victoire (set menus from £33; pierrevictoire.co.uk). Wider Oxfordshire sings with autumn foliage and you should visit Harcourt Arboretum (£9; obga.ox.ac.uk). Punting on the river runs until late November (£32 an hour; oxfordpunting.co.uk). Stay at the smart, central Mercure Oxford Eastgate.

Details Room-only doubles from £148 (all.accor.com)

BELFAST

The Northern Irish capital is home to the grand estates Stormont and Barnett Demesne, not to mention Belfast Castle – all atmospheric spots for admiring autumn foliage. You're spoilt for choice for cosy dining spots: the Muddlers Club uses seasonal ingredients to create elegant dishes (tasting menu £100; themuddlersclubbelfast.com), while cult cafés the Pocket (thepocket.coffee) and Harlem (harlemcafebelfast.com) pack in the brunchers. Craving some music? Make for the Duke of York on Commercial Court (dukeofyorkbelfast.com) or join the Traditional Music Trail led by professional musicians (£20; belfasttradtrail.com).

Clockwise from main: Bath Abbey and the River Avon; Stravaigin in Glasgow; punting in Oxford; John Rylands Library, a Manchester Literature Festival venue

Stay at the plush Titanic Hotel, which is right by the dock where the famous ship was built and the museum dedicated to it.
Details B&B doubles from £159 (titanichotelbelfast.com)

MANCHESTER

A wander of the canal quarter, Castlefield Basin, takes on a romantic feel in autumn – all red-brick converted mills and warehouses set off by butterscotch leaves and red ivy. Just as inspiring is the food and culture scene: for fine art try the Manchester Art Gallery, where the wistful, autumnal pre-Raphaelites have a strong presence (free; manchesterartgallery.org), then stop for a bite at Higher Ground, a love letter to seasonal fare, with pumpkin, celeriac and venison the stars come autumn (sharing plates from £7; highergroundmcr.co.uk). In October a literature festival features talks and readings from Mick Herron and Elizabeth Day, among others (from £12; manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk). Stay at the quirky former textile warehouse Abode Manchester for proximity to the shops and cafés of the Northern Quarter.
Details Room-only doubles from £64 (abodemanchester.co.uk)

NORWICH

Norwich is a great city to enjoy a riverside amble, afternoon tea and a visit to a creative British brasserie. Start at the cathedral (free; cathedral.org.uk) and the market on Gentleman's Walk, fuelling up with an excellent afternoon tea at the half-timbered Britons Arms (from £21; britonsarms.com). Next up, sheltered shopping comes courtesy of the Royal Arcade (royalarcadenorwich.co.uk). Head to Mousehold Heath or Eaton Park to crunch through the leaves before checking in at the 38 St Giles boutique hotel, with a full English breakfast each morning – it's close to the Lanes shopping honeypot.
Details B&B doubles from £136 (38stgiles.co.uk)
Lucy Thackray

Where is your favourite UK autumn city break? Let us know in the comments online

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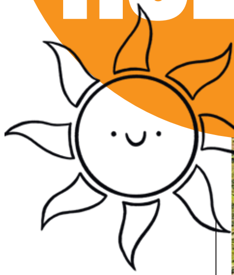
THE £400 HOLIDAY



Sardinia is great value in October, when it's still warm and the grape harvest is in full swing on the island

MARCO MULARGIA/ALAMY

There's no better time to go to Sardinia than in early October. The summer crowds have thinned, temperatures are still in the mid-twenties and resorts have a more laid-back feel as the end of the tourist season approaches. The sea is warm enough for a dip, but milder days are perfect for hiking, sightseeing and wine-tasting during the island's lively grape harvest.

Stay in the seafront city of Olbia on the island's northeast coast to make it easy to get around. Seven nights' room only at Mercure Olbia, including flights from London Gatwick, costs £445pp with easyJet, departing on September 30. A small under-seat bag is included and a 15kg checked suitcase can be added for £67 return. Take local bus No 2 or No 10 from the airport to Olbia's train station, which is a five-minute walk from the hotel (£2 each way; aspo.it).

The four-star hotel is within strolling distance of the city's historic centre and has spacious rooms. There's an outdoor pool, a spa with a hammam and a bistro restaurant serving light bites and Sardinian wines. Take a 20-minute bus ride from outside the hotel to the nearest beach, at Pittulongu, *above*, which has white sand, clear, shallow water and beachfront restaurants overlooking the island of Tavolara. From there, walk to Bados beach to join a dolphin-spotting boat trip to Figarolo Island with a marine biologist (from £30; getyourguide.com).

In Olbia itself, there are buzzy piazzas, cobbled streets and a waterfront promenade. Historic highlights include the 11th-century Romanesque Basilica di San Simplicio, a Roman aqueduct on Via Nanni and the sacred well of Sa Testa (all free; sardegnaturismo.it).

The city is in the Gallura region, which is famous for its vermentino white wine. The Vigneti Zanatta winery hosts two-hour bicycle tours of its vineyard including a platter of Sardinian snacks (£30; vignetizanatta.it), while Tenute Olbios offers a range of guided tastings (from £30; tenuteolbios.com). Gallura is also a hiker's dream. The Riu Mulinu trail winds uphill from the city to the medieval Castle of Pedres for views over the Gulf of Olbia while Monte Pino heads inland past forests and granite rocks. For more challenging hikes, the 70,000-hectare Gennargentu National Park is two hours' drive south and home to both the island's highest peak, Punta La Marmora, and the dramatic Gola Su Gorropu limestone canyon (£5 entry). Opt for a 4x4 trip inside the canyon for a less tiring option (£24; gorropu.info).
Siobhan Grogan

> “ Vigneti Zanatta winery hosts bicycle tours of its vineyard

WHAT YOU GET FOR YOUR £445PP

- Return Gatwick-Olbia flights, departing on September 30
- Seven nights' room only at Mercure Olbia (easyjet.com)

Feeling flush?

If you're inspired to visit Sardinia and have more to spend, try one of these...

THE £800 HOLIDAY

An hour's drive north of Olbia in the Santa Reparata bay, the five-star Mangia's Santa Teresa, Sardinia, Curio Collection by Hilton is ideal if sea views are non-negotiable. There are several beaches within a ten-minute walk, including one home to the hotel's own beach club, plus an adults-only infinity pool overlooking the Med. Smart, unfussy rooms are arranged around flower-filled patios and a bistro serves upmarket Italian dishes. Elsewhere there's a gym, tennis court and spa.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £849pp, including flights and luggage, departing on October 4 (tui.co.uk)

THE £1,400 HOLIDAY

The Grand Hotel in Porto Cervo is 50m from the white-sand beach of Cala Granu in the heart of Costa Smeralda, a 40-minute drive north of Olbia. The 113 rooms have a classic Mediterranean feel with whitewashed walls and limestone bathrooms. All have either a garden or sea view. A large freshwater pool is surrounded by juniper trees and there are tennis courts, a gym and an Italian restaurant. The smart seafront resort of Porto Cervo is a five-minute drive away.
Details Seven nights' half-board from £1,413pp, including flights and luggage, departing on September 28 (britishairways.com)

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THE RITZ-CARLTON; LAURA PULLMAN

Toddling in Tenerife

For families with preschool kids, this Canary island ticks all the boxes for a late break, says *Laura Pullman*

I assume other parents of small children must do it too. While on holiday where a baby monitor won't stretch the required distance from hotel bedroom to hotel bar, I instead video call my husband's phone on WhatsApp, leave his phone in the room facing the cot and take my (muted) phone with us to keep an eye on the sprog. Does that make us awful parents?

On night two at the Ritz-Carlton Abama in Tenerife, we have the baby-monitor WhatsApp call in place. Our son, Reggie, is asleep after a taxing day of sandcastle building and ice-cream eating and our margaritas have just arrived. After months of London life I'd forgotten starry nights could look so good.

Then my husband, Geordie, looks down at the phone and sees a tattooed arm (which definitely doesn't belong to our two-year-old) moving across the screen of the phone left in the bedroom. Someone else is in our hotel room. Geordie hurtles off. A few frantic minutes later, I find him trying to get his heart rate back to normal. It turns out that a cleaner had been putting some Lindt chocolates beside our bed. Various lessons can be learnt here but, for starters, if you are going to leave a toddler unattended in your hotel room, first put the "Do not disturb" sign on the door and sacrifice the chocs.

Slack parenting methods aside, this holiday was chosen largely with Reggie in mind: a buckets and spades break with no time difference, a short(ish) flight and (practically) guaranteed good weather. In mid-March not many places tick those boxes besides Tenerife, which is perhaps why our friends who're also in the young family phase keep going there. It's a four-hour flight, on the same time zone as the UK and, if you stay in the more touristy southern part of the island, the sun is likely to have his hat on. In my mind this time of life is precious. With no children of school age yet, we can avoid overly expensive flights (we paid £763 for three return flights from Gatwick) and the crowds that come in the school holidays.

The hotel's multiple pools are largely empty, the oceanfront tables at breakfast are free and Abama beach is busy but not overly so. A small train takes you down the resort's hillside to the beach cove. On our first day we meet a German father with his three-year-old daughter who are riding the train up and down for the morning without ever getting off. It's funny how the goalposts of a successful holiday change once children come along.

We spend three days at the Ritz-Carlton bouncing between the pools, the playground and the beach, where Reggie meets Ronnie, a British toddler friend. Gangster twins in their UPF 50+ swimsuits.

I tag out of parenting for a few hours to escape to the spa. Ingrid the masseuse gives me the Earth, Wind and Fire treatment, the massage for people who feel like they must earn a massage. To begin you receive a gentle sandpapering with lava sand poured over your body and exfoliated off. Warning: do not get sunburnt before this treatment. Then comes the indulgent bit, the massage with hot stones, hot hands and hot towels.

A 20-minute drive north up the coast is Santiago del Teide, where we walk the Chinyero trail (named after the looming volcano) among the pink-blossomed almond trees and wild flowers. The hike is rebranded as a "lizard hunt" for the toddler, which keeps spirits high for the two-hour loop up the rocky terrain, across farm plots and vineyards and, at one point, through some beehives. (The buzzing builds, I close my mouth, get Reggie on my shoulders and run.) We get briefly lost, end up in a valley of cacti and have to turn back on ourselves just as the midday heat is picking up. "A fun little detour," says Geordie, the chief map-reader.

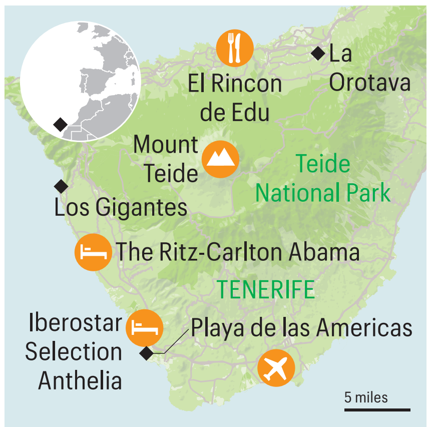
> “The hike is rebranded as a ‘lizard hunt’ for the two-year-old

Back in the car for another 20 minutes to Los Gigantes on the coast to see the 800m towering cliffs and black-sand beaches below. With tired legs, we reach the trail's head to get a proper cliff view before turning back for chocolate chip cookies and coffees at Huggin a Mug café. Definitely a trail to do without little ones.

Halfway through our trip we change hotels, driving 20 minutes south to the more bustling Costa Adeje to stay at Iberostar Selection Anthelia, another mammoth hotel suited to young families. While Reggie has discos and activities in the kids' area, I join in with the daily exercise class led by twinkly-eyed Mario in the main (thankfully heated) pool. "Beautiful", "lovely", Mario yells from the pool's edge as about twenty hotel guests ranging from their twenties to their seventies jump around happily with foam noodles.

As Tenerife first-timers, the island's most famous attraction, Mount Teide, also Spain's highest peak (3,715m), feels like a must. Up early one morning, after a drive-by at the buffet (pancakes, custard pastries, cakes, hot chocolates for the two-year-old; "We're on holiday," we tell ourselves), we drive for an hour of sharp bends, descending fog and the current favourite song, *Colonel Hathi's March* ("hup, two, three, four") from *The Jungle Book*, on repeat. "It's definitely brightening up," "There's blue sky over there," we say as the landscape changes from lush pines to lunar rock formations. We're not hiking up the volcano but have bought two online tickets for the 9.10am cable car to take us up to a height of 3,555m in a matter of minutes instead.

Laura and her family; above, the Ritz-Carlton Tenerife, Abama



Except, on arrival, we learn that the cable car is closed because there are winds of 80mph at the top and, besides, only children aged three and up are allowed. (We'd wrongly deduced that you couldn't buy tickets online for two-year-olds because they go free.)

Ah well. We're at least higher than the clouds now and the sky is blue so we pivot and instead go for a walk in the Teide National Park, clambering up the towering rocks and pocked *Star Trek*-esque terrain. Lizard hunt round two.

Then we're back down the volcano ("hup, two, three, four") to La Orotava, an aristocratic town in the north that has far more beautiful architecture and far fewer British tourists. It's raining (stay south with the Brits if you want the sun), so after a soggy stroll among the gardens we duck into the Club Social Liceo Taoro for dulce de leche biscuits and more hot chocolates. Wet weather plus toddler doesn't equal calm and enjoyable exploration of architecture, which is how we find ourselves at the lunchtime parrot show at Loro Parque, the island's zoo.

En route back south, we first head off the main road to find one of the island's *guachinche*, traditional family-run restaurants. Nestled in a banana plantation is El Rincon de Edu, unassuming but reassuringly full of locals, where we squabble over who gets the most papas arrugadas: small salt-flecked baked potatoes that you dip in red or green mojo sauces. After befriending the restaurant's cats, Reggie totters outside to find his pudding: two ripe bananas plucked from the tree.

Adventuring achieved, we spend the final day on Costa Adeje's seafront promenade. Reggie plays mini-golf, tears around the beachside soft play (Adventure Land) and negotiates multiple ice creams. I'm at peace with the changed goalposts of what makes a satisfying break.

Avoid the tourist-stuffed Playa de las Americas in the south of the town and instead walk north to the quieter Playa del Duque. This end is more pink bougainvillea, less Burger King. Just in time, we learn a good lesson: if you book a 6.15pm table at SeaSoul (one of the Iberostar hotel's four restaurants) you'll be eating locally caught grilled octopus and fat, juicy prawns on the oceanfront as the sun sets. Plus you can bring your child and dodge any WhatsApp baby monitor debacles. A win.

Laura Pullman was a guest of the Ritz-Carlton Tenerife, Abama, which has B&B doubles from £240 (ritzcarlton.com), and Iberostar Selection Anthelia, which has all-inclusive doubles from £213 (iberostar.com). Fly to Tenerife

Continued on page 6 ➔

More sunny stays in the Canaries

Tropical La Palma, mountainous La Gomera – these islands make for warm, scenic escapes

CASA DE LAS FLORES, TEGUISE, LANZAROTE

This former 18th-century home close to the shops and restaurants of Teguise, the island's biggest town, is a relaxed adults-only boutique hotel with just five rooms, and has been lovingly converted by the artist and owner Gigi de Vidal and her husband. Its traditional stone architecture is combined with all-white walls, minimalist lights, a scattering of antiques and bespoke artwork by Vidal. There's no restaurant but there are elaborate weekly dinners, regular wine tastings and an honesty bar.

Details Room-only doubles from £147 (hotelcasadelasflores.es). Fly to Lanzarote

SEASIDE PALM BEACH, MASPALOMAS, GRAN CANARIA

This family-friendly five-star resort is surrounded by a palm grove and is a few minutes' walk from the sand dunes of Maspalomas. Designed in a retro 1970s style, its decor mixes bold patterns, abstract art and bright colours inspired by the Gran Canarian landscape. All rooms have balconies overlooking either the gardens or the Atlantic. There are also tennis courts, a spa, a huge heated outdoor pool, three restaurants, outdoor t'ai chi lessons and barbecue evenings, while kids will love the playground, giant chess, separate children's pools and direct beach access.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,120pp, including flights and transfers (tui.co.uk)

HOTEL GRAN REY, VALLE GRAN REY, LA GOMERA

The seafront location is the main attraction at Hotel Gran Rey, the green and mountainous island's longest established resort in the centre of Valle Gran Rey. There's a black sand beach outside, a tennis court, two restaurants – including one with an outdoor terrace – and a rooftop swimming pool with sea and mountain views. Rooms are simple and unfussy in tasteful neutrals with statement rainbow-striped headboards, tiled floors and evocative local photography on the walls. Restaurants, bars and the harbour are in strolling distance and the hiking trails of Garajonay National Park are a short drive away.

> "Tazacorte has black sand beaches and a banana museum

Details Seven nights' B&B from £478pp, including flights and transfers (firstchoice.co.uk)

CASA MONTELONGO, LA OLIVA, FUERTEVENTURA

There are just two straight-from-a-magazine suites to choose from at this adults-only property in the sleepy village of La Oliva in the north of the island. Both face a shared courtyard saltwater pool and run entirely on solar energy. Each minimalistic suite has a sleek designer kitchenette, white interiors made of traditional materials including stone, clay and lime, and oversized stone bath tubs. Statement sofas provide a shock of colour and furnishings are made by local artisans using natural fibres. Homemade breakfasts are delivered to your doorstep in a hamper each morning. The surfy beach town of Corralejo, a 15-minute drive away, is the place to head for a boat trip to the beautiful Isla de Lobos nature reserve.

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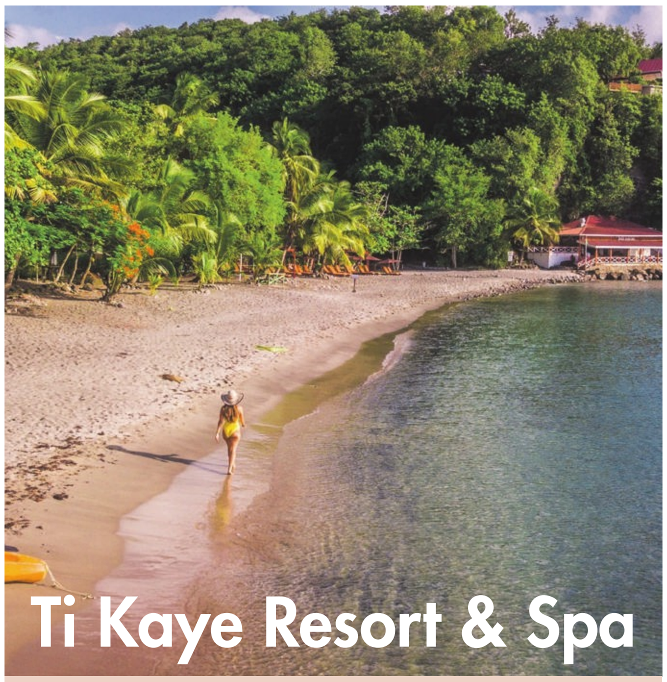
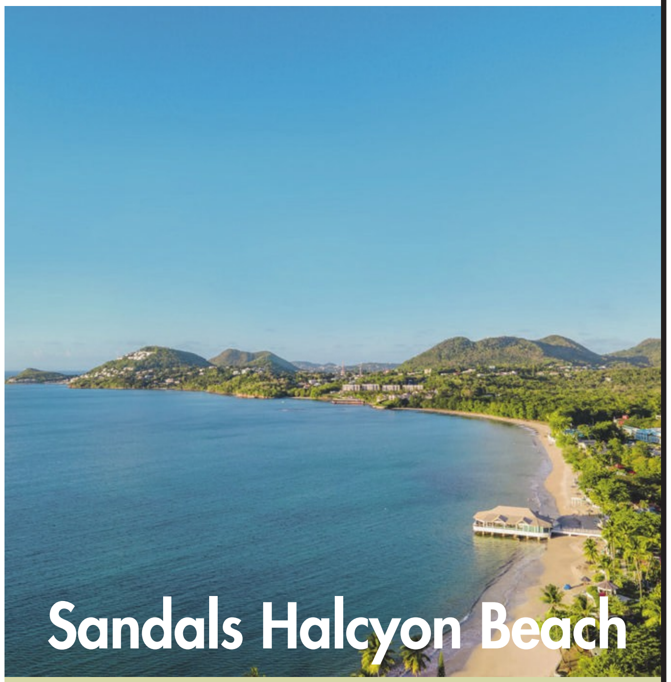


Ti Kaye Resort & Spa

7 nights from **£2,299**
Direct flights, 4★ **all inclusive** beach resort and private transfers

Boasting stunning views, this charming, adults only resort is hidden away on Anse Cochon cove, perfectly nestled along the cliff overlooking the blue waters and pretty beach below.



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Details B&B doubles from £195 (mrandmrssmith.com). Fly to Fuerteventura

HOTEL PUNTAGRANDE, FRONTERA, EL HIERRO

Recognised by Guinness World Records as the world's smallest hotel, this teeny property made from black basalt sits on a tongue of lava rock jutting into the ocean on an island once considered to be the end of the world. It is adults-only and has just four rooms, all ocean-facing and built in lava stone. Furniture is crafted in local wood and bedside tables are made from the building's original porthole glass. There's also a popular restaurant that serves a zero-mile tasting menu with wines made on El Hierro.
Details B&B doubles from £286 (hotelpuntagrande.com). Fly to El Hierro, via Tenerife

HOTEL HACIENDA DE ABAJO, TAZACORTE, LA PALMA

With its black volcanic mountains and vivid tropical plants, La Palma has a striking appearance, and is great for hiking. Surrounded by banana trees, the Hotel Hacienda de Abajo is a former 17th-century sugar plantation in the historic centre of Tazacorte with its black sand beaches, marina and Europe's only banana museum. The 32 rooms are arranged around an interior garden. All are decorated in a traditional style with antique furniture, terracotta-tiled bathrooms and brightly coloured walls in sunshine yellow or burnished orange that showcase artwork from the hotel's vast collection. A heated pool is hidden among the tropical gardens and a spa has a second indoor heated pool, sauna and yoga classes. The tower of the hotel's old hacienda has a viewing platform for sunset drinks.
Details Room-only doubles from £137 (hotelhaciendadeabajo.com). Fly to La Palma

THE PARK SUITES, SANTA CRUZ, TENERIFE

There are just five suites in this late 19th-century house next to Garcia Sanabria Park, an easy walk from the capital's historic centre. Each one has its own living room and kitchen and understated styling in greys, oatmeal and sage green. There's also a separate split-level garden suite. Original features include a sweeping staircase, hydraulic tiled floors and a former cistern by the pool, which has been converted into a wellbeing area for alfresco yoga.
Details Room-only doubles from £83, two-night minimum stay (theparksuites.es). Fly to Tenerife

ALAVA SUITES, COSTA TEGUISE, LANZAROTE

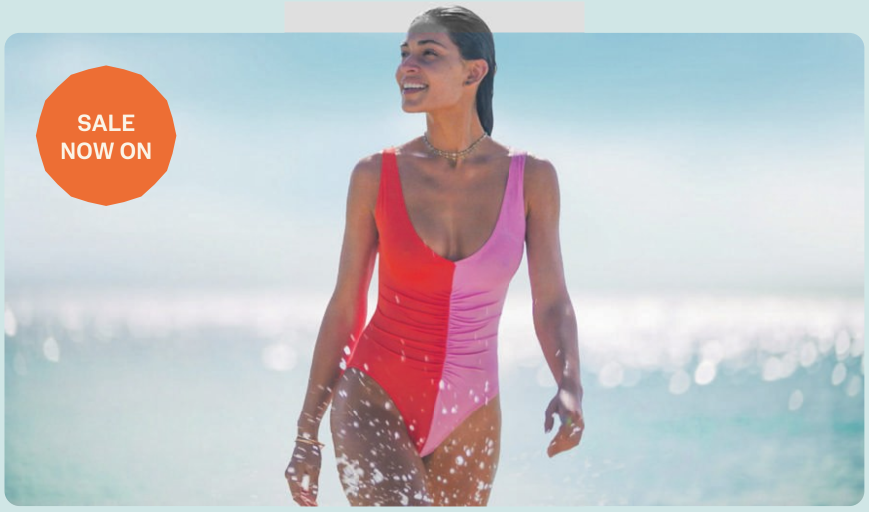
Owned by the fashion designer Maria Alava, this boutique beauty has six all-white, less-is-more suites. All have kitchens with handmade crockery, wooden furniture crafted by local carpenters and throws in earthy organic textiles. Four rooms have terraces or balconies. Guests can lounge round the circular pool or drop by the wellness studio for yoga and meditation sessions, or head further into Costa Teguise, the coastal town on the east side of the island where the hotel lies.
Details B&B doubles from £130, two-night minimum stay (alavasuites.com). Fly to Lanzarote

SAUL SANTOS; SEASIDE PALM BEACH

Clockwise from above far left: Hotel Hacienda de Abajo on La Palma; Seaside Palm Beach on Gran Canaria; the Park Suites on Tenerife

SANTA CATALINA, A ROYAL HIDEAWAY HOTEL, LAS PALMAS, GRAN CANARIA

This five-star grande dame has been welcoming royalty and celebrities to Gran Canaria since the late 19th century and is the archipelago's oldest hotel. In the residential Ciudad Jardin neighbourhood and close to the sandy Las Canteras beach, the hotel has an opulent feel with marble floors and a neoclassical design. The Michelin-starred Poemas restaurant is the big draw for its extravagant tasting menus, but there's also a huge pool surrounded by palms, a rooftop bar and a large spa with a hydrotherapy circuit and three types of sauna.
Details Seven nights' room only from £724pp, including flights (britishairways.com)
Siobhan Grogan



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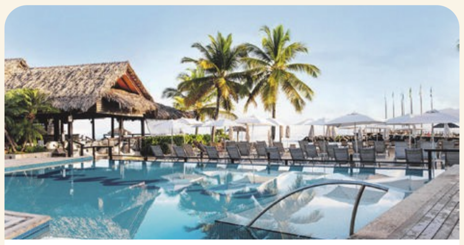

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A trip to the 19th century

An Orkney farmstead recreates rural life in Victorian times – *Lottie Gross* is the first to stay

Step inside Boloquoy and it's as if nothing has changed in the past two centuries. There are 19th-century antiques strewn across every surface of the 250-year-old house, overlooking the choppy Lashy Sound on the island of Sanday in Orkney. A pipe is set down on a dresser as though its smoker will return to relight it at any moment. On the mantelpiece is a box of 19th-century snuff, half inhaled. It's like a museum of Victorian excesses – except that it's a holiday rental and, for the next two nights, my home.

Boloquoy didn't always look as cosy and characterful as this. When Jackie Sinclair was handed the keys in 2023, she and her business partner, Dave Walker, opened the front door to what could only be described as a hoarding situation. Boxes of papers, crockery, clothes, trinkets and tools were stacked high, left untouched for decades. Their plan, as co-owners of the accommodation company Orkney Retreats (and Sanday locals), had been to modernise the property in line with their other high-end self-catering cottages. But as they slowly began to unpack more than two centuries' worth of belongings, they realised that they simply couldn't erase the previous owners' legacy. In what originally seemed like boxes of rubbish was the social history of the island of Sanday and its people.

So instead of sprucing up the tired old house, they spruced down, carefully removing many of the modern trappings that had been installed. They then set about a renovation that has reverted the home to a Victorian time capsule.

Sinclair and Walker deconstructed old furniture to build Victorian-style box beds and stripped back the wallpaper as far as they could, putting up fresh designs as close to the originals as possible.

Sinclair is there to greet me and show me around when I arrive, and to tell about me some of the history she has unravelled. Boloquoy was built by James Fea, the illegitimate son of a local laird, in the mid-1700s, and his descendants lived there until 2023, when its final resident, Oliver Drever, moved into assisted housing in Kirkwall.

It began as a traditional "but-and-ben" – the Scots term for a two-room cottage – and was later extended upwards, with a side extension added in the 1950s.

"There's a story behind this," Sinclair says as I admire a photograph of a young, handsome sailor in a round frame, painted like a life ring with the words "HMS Hannibal" on it. Hardly an auspicious name, I think to myself, though the cannibalistic connotations didn't apply in the early 20th century, when this young man, a descendant of James, set sail on the navy battleship.

"We couldn't figure out why he was in an Anzac uniform," Sinclair says, "but once we found his records we realised he had been in the merchant navy and was in Australia when the First World War broke out. He was conscripted there. We later found a letter addressed to his parents saying he died on the Somme."

It turns out that there's a story behind most things here, and the attention to detail is astonishing, creating an utterly immersive space. One of the upstairs bedrooms (there are three, sleeping six in total) is made up for little Annie Fea, who lived here in

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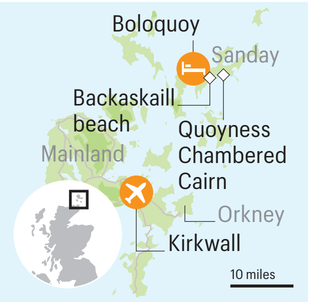
DEAN ALLEN; LOTTIE GROSS

1886. Her portrait hangs above the fireplace and a scrapbook that her friends made for her lies open on the bed. Her jewellery box sits open on a wooden chest and a Victorian doll's house is ready for play, its rooms lovingly decorated by Walker using fragments of original carpets and wallpaper.

I choose this as my bedroom for the weekend and sleep soundly inside the traditional box bed, which has doors that I can close if I feel spooked. For the next three days I play house, preparing broad beans from the garden in the kitchen, which is set in the 1950s to match the extension it is in, with a mid-century oven and 70-year-old Fairy Liquid bottles that Walker scavenged from the beach. I snack on traditional bere grain bannocks (Scottish flatbread) with Sinclair's homemade cheese and butter. I find myself beginning to relate to those #tradwife influencers as I begin to enjoy this slower pace of life.

In this modern world it's tempting to look at the lives of people in the past who had this kind of existence as simple and basic. They were, though, anything but, and the range of tools, gadgets and supplies found here – from new shoe soles to farming equipment – is testament to the myriad skills these people possessed. We have been thoroughly deskilled as a population. As I sit by the fire one evening with a pair of the creative locals who can be booked for traditional craft experiences at Boloquoy, I am humbled by those who came before. I try cross-stitch and manage to complete eight squares but am embarrassed by an old spinning wheel that's too quick for my technology-reliant brain (sandaycrafthub.com).


Boloquoy
Sanday
Backaskaill beach
Mainland
Quoyness Chambered Cairn
Orkney
Kirkwall
10 miles

Living here was no doubt hard work, especially during the stormy winters for which this island is known. Fortunately, Sinclair and Walker make it easier for guests by providing a full afternoon tea and a hamper of treats. Plus they have added a modern bathroom with a sauna (the Victorians generally didn't have bathrooms, so they took a liberty with this).

When I'm not living my best #tradwife life in the house, I explore Sanday, which is packed with things to do, despite being only 12 miles long. The Heritage Centre has fascinating exhibitions about shipwrecks, Viking discoveries and wildlife, and I walk along the mighty Tresness dunes in search of whales. I take a dip at nearby Backaskaill, which has sparkling white sand, and soak up neolithic history at the exceptionally well-preserved Quoyness Chambered Cairn, which has a tunnel you can crawl through. It would be easy to spend a week here, or pair a stay with time on mainland Orkney, from where the ferry runs.

From far left: Boloquoy on the island of Sanday; the owners, Dave Walker and Jackie Sinclair; the farmhouse's Victorian and 1950s interiors

After a last sauna I enjoy my final hours at Boloquoy in the sunny vegetable garden, drinking tea with Sinclair and Walker out of vintage mugs. "When you spend time here you realise they were entirely self-sufficient – no Amazon next-day delivery here – and the footprint they left on this planet was virtually zero," Sinclair says. "It has changed the whole way I think about what sustainability really is."

I ruminate on this as I drive away. After staying in secluded places I am often relieved to get back to the "real world", but returning to a life of modern excess and AI now feels wrong. On the ferry back to mainland Orkney I'm annoyed to catch myself doomscrolling. I immediately close Instagram and type in a Google search: "Where to buy wooden drop spinner." Amazon has one for less than a tenner, with next-day delivery. You can take the girl out of the modern world for a few nights at Boloquoy, but you can't take the modern world out of the girl – not completely, at least.

Lottie Gross was a guest of Orkney Retreats, which has five nights' self-catering for six from £2,950; open from April 1 to September 30 (boloquoy.co.uk)

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Gumbo and gators on the bayou

Laid-back Lafayette has great food, great music and the largest river swamp in America – home to a snappy chap named Fred, says *Jonathan Thompson*

Things get mixed up in the state of Louisiana. Stews, music, bloodlines – they all went into the pot at one point or another. But there's one place where this cultural gumbo is noticeably richer than others: Lafayette. The capital of Cajun Country is two hours' drive west of New Orleans and even more laid-back than the Big Easy. Down here, in the belly of southern Louisiana, folks live by three simple rules: good food, good music and good company.

New Orleans has a well-known slogan: "*Laissez les bons temps rouler*." Well, the good times have been rolling in Lafayette too, since the 1760s, when the French first started hacking this city from the swamp. And they're still rolling.

Maybe it's this emphasis on joie de vivre; maybe it's the spirited live music scene, from upbeat zydeco to soulful swamp pop; or the stomach-stretching pleasures of rich Cajun cuisine; maybe it's just the reliable sunshine and proximity to the mellow shores of the Gulf coast – but one thing is official: Lafayette is "the Happiest City in America".

Many have laid claim to this jovial title over the years, but Lafayette is backed by a National Bureau of Economic Research study into long-term happiness, and it has become the town's official slogan.

When exploring this contentment – easily achieved on a road trip between New Orleans and Houston – the best place to start is the dining table. "Cajun" is a derivation of "Acadian", the French emigrants booted from Nova Scotia by the British during the Grand Dérangement in the 18th century who resettled in French-speaking Louisiana. They brought their traditional recipes, which were twisted, tweaked and improved by their interactions with Native American and Creole cultures, as everyone worked together to survive the soupy swamp.

Today there's a head-spinning amount of these dishes to try, from creamy crawfish étouffée and peppery seafood gumbo to pillowy po'boy sandwiches and spicy, ricey boudin sausages (though Louisianans will tell you that they aren't sausages at all). Fortunately there's an easy way to sample this epic eating: Cajun Food Tours, a private introduction to the city's epicurean highlights (tours from £50; cajunfoodtours.com).

"Joie de vivre isn't just a motto, it's a way of life here," my guide, Marie Ducote-Comeaux, says. "We don't live to work; we work hard to live well … and that includes eating well."

After sampling fat boudin slices from Johnson's Boucanière (mains from £5; johnsonsboucaniere.com) and po'boys at Old Tyme Grocery (mains from £7; oldtymegrocery.com), we pull up at Bon Temps Grill, where we're treated to steaming andouille gumbo served with a traditional side of rice (mains from £11; bontempsgrill.com).

Once the gumbo has gone we head across town to Louisiana Crawfish Time, where I slowly get my head (and fingers) around the sticky art of crawfish eating (mains from £15; lacrawfishtime.com). Louisianans wouldn't dream of using cutlery to munch their beloved "mud bugs", which are usually dusted in cayenne pepper, garlic and salt before being boiled with sausage and potatoes.

Louisiana produces 90 per cent of America's crawfish – which isn't such a shocking statistic when you realise that the state is also home to the Atchafalaya Basin, the nation's largest river swamp, at about 1.4 million acres. Lafayette is the gateway to this marshy mecca, so I sign up for an airboat trip with Atchafalaya Basin Landing Airboat Swamp Tours, a 25-minute drive from downtown.

Shrouded in Spanish moss and seemingly cut off from civilisation, the misty waterways of this flooded forest have a whiff of the magical. I half expect to see a slender arm emerging from the dreamy morass, clutching a sword. Instead, when the surface breaks, it's for the slimy snout of an alligator named Fred. "*Allons Fred … viens*," shouts my guide, Nick Friedman. "He only speaks French."

Friedman is another local who is full of joie de vivre, piloting his airboat merrily around the marshland, stopping to stroke alligators who growl and purr like cats (tours from £48; basinlanding.com).

Back in Lafayette I head to Spoonbill Watering Hole & Restaurant, set in a 1930s gas station on the main drag, Jefferson Street. Here I tuck into juicy barbecued shrimp drenched in beer, butter and Creole spices while chatting to the upbeat executive chef, Jeremy Conner (mains from £10, spoonbillrestaurant.com).

"I think Lafayette might be the friendliest city in America as well as the happiest," says Conner, originally from Florida. "There seems to be a real togetherness about this place."

This cheerful coalescence is evident all over Lafayette, particularly in the honky-tonks and dance halls of downtown, where zydeco – the bullish, toe-tapping sound of the bayou – remains king, though ballad-driven Cajun music and rocky swamp pop are not far behind. Whatever is playing it's impossible to stand on the edge of these dancefloors once the music starts, because someone will grab you and throw you into the mix . I successfully test this theory at the Blue Moon Saloon, emerging hours later with sore feet and a happy heart (drinks from £3; bluemoonpresents.com).

The happiness here, as everyone is at pains to point out, comes from togetherness. And that togetherness comes from Lafayette's earliest days, when cast-out Cajuns, Creoles and Native Americans embraced each other to survive. It's a story described beautifully at Vermilionville Historic Village, an open-air museum with period buildings and chatty costumed actors (£7; bayouvermiliondistrict.org).

More tellingly, it's also a story told everywhere from the communal dining tables of pretty B&Bs such as Maison Mouton, a converted 200-year-old farmhouse on the edge of downtown with live music, to cocktail temples, including Palmyre (cocktails from £10; thepalmyre.com) and jazz hotspots such as Whiskey & Vine (wvlounge.com).

The happiest city in America? Lafayette certainly has the good food, music and company to back it up. And there's no denying the life-affirming vibes given off by the Cajun capital, which continues to serve up joy in its own raw and unfiltered yet soft and welcoming way.

Jonathan Thompson was a guest of Lafayette Travel (lafayettetravel.com). Purely Travel has seven nights' room only – with three nights in Lafayette and four nights in New Orleans – from £1,199, including flights (purelytravel.co.uk)

From top right: the Lafayette jazz joint Whiskey & Vine; a house at Vermilionville Historic Village; Spanish moss on a cypress tree

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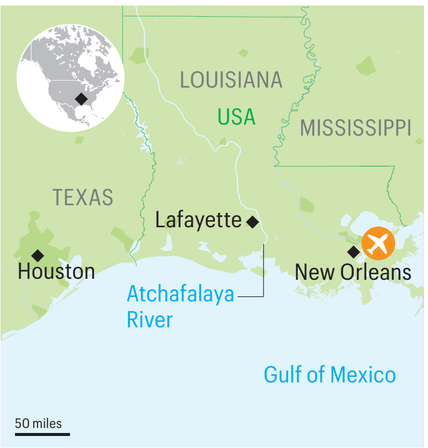

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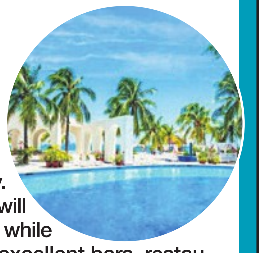

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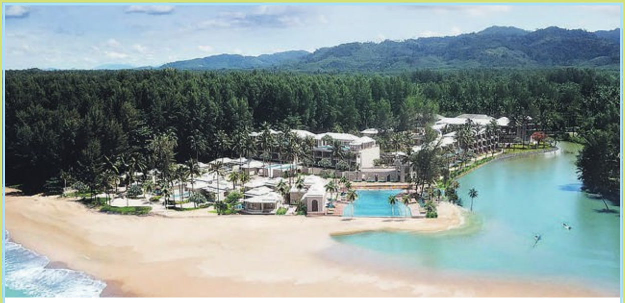

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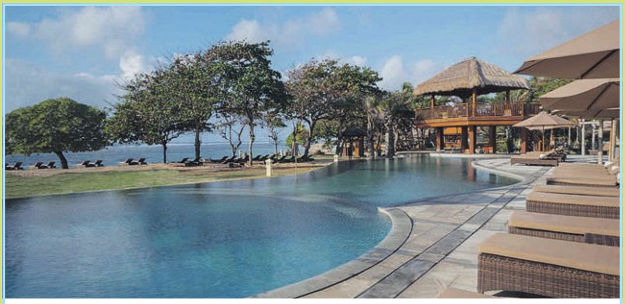

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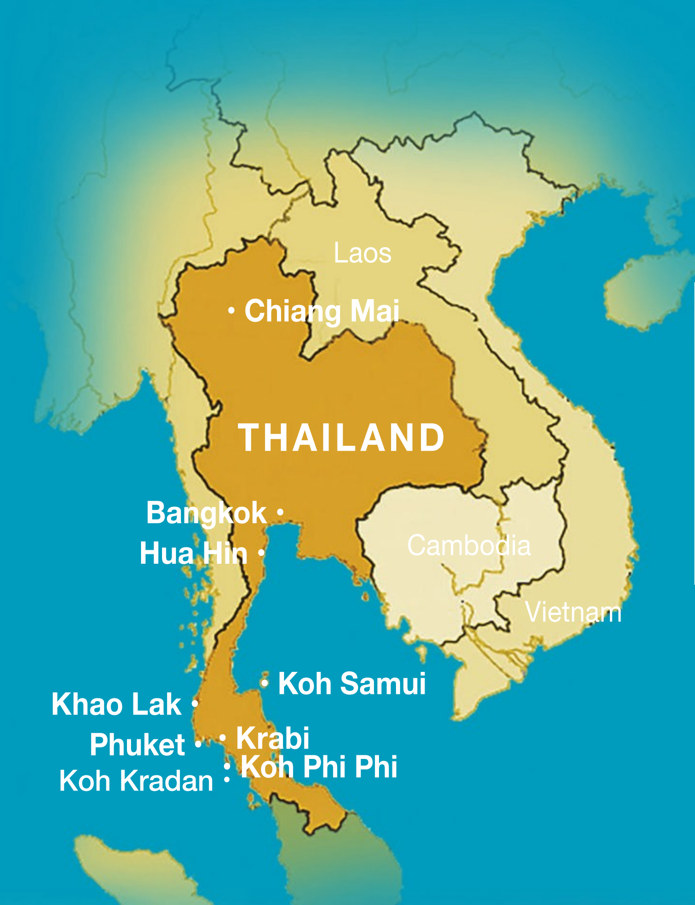

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The stylish way to see Taipei

The Taiwanese capital is home to seriously impressive new hotels, says *Nicole Trilivas*

Walking out of the harsh sun into the shadow of Taipei 101, the bamboo-shaped skyscraper that is an icon of the city, I plop down my bag and crane my neck to take in its full 508m height. Though I've been here a few days, it is the first time I've seen the building up close, and it is indeed a wonder. Another wonder? My unguarded bag – I wouldn't normally be so blasé, but things are different here.

The Taiwanese capital is as clean, quiet and green as Singapore, has a food scene to rival that of Tokyo (without the high prices and tourist crowds) and is easier than mainland China in almost every way (no visas or firewalls and even the traffic is reasonable). Plus, it's easy to reach: China Airlines operates five direct flights a week from London, but the luxe way to go is via Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific. Of course, there's the simmering dispute with Beijing, but on a micro-level it's super-safe, with very low crime rates. As a local tells me: "The only thing you have to worry about here is what you're going to eat." So that's exactly where I start.

I head to Dadaocheng, one of the oldest areas of the city, on a food tour with Jean Huang, who takes tourists to vendors and backstreet restaurants without English menus. We visit a dozen places, each with a different speciality: fish-ball soup with bigeye thresher shark at Jia Xing; salted plum cake at Long Yue Tang. And the pork is another level. "It's all freshly butchered from nearby farms," Jean says. And while you may have tried xiao long bao at a Din Tai Fung restaurant in London, you must try the soup dumplings at the original Xinyi Street location. "It's just different," Jean says (tours from £45; taipeieats.com).

Having risen to prominence in the 1860s, Dihua Street wins me over with its hotch-potch of Qing-dynasty shopfronts and Japanese colonial townhouses. Alongside fourth-generation teahouses and traditional-medicine shops with apothecary cabinets, there are newer additions giving it an upmarket air – such as the artisanal homeware shop Visible City and the San Formosan café and roastery for homegrown coffee (sancoffee.shop).

Of course, tea (especially bubble tea, invented here in the 1980s) remains a signature drink. It has even become a key ingredient in cocktails such as the Vesper, made with award-winning oolong tea at Indulge, in Da'an district (cocktails from £10; indulgebistrotaipei.blogspot.com), and the Leicha, which features traditional tea prepared by the Hakka community at the Mandarin Oriental hotel's MO Bar, in Songshan district (cocktails from £10; mandarinoriental.com).

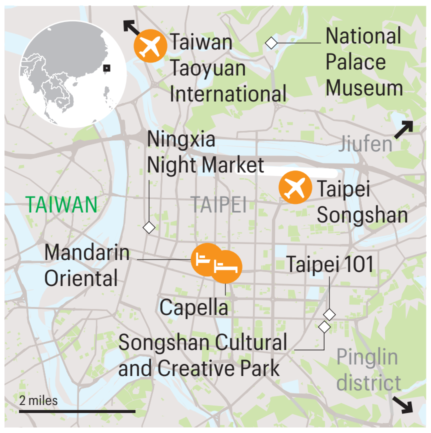
The mist-draped tea plantations of Pinglin district, about 20 miles southeast, make a good escape. As does Jiufen, a former gold-mining town 20 miles east.

I head out with Henry Huang from Taipei Private Car Charter Tour. We visit the National Palace Museum, filled with carved jade, including the Qing-dynasty Jadeite Cabbage; the ghost-white marble memorial of the former nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek; and the incense-scented Longshan Temple and its dragon motifs ("That's how you can tell it's Taoist," Henry says).

As we flit about the city, Taipei 101 punctuates the skyline like an exclamation mark, as though to remind me that it was the world's tallest building before the Burj Khalifa. We end our tour at Ningxia Night Market for oyster omelettes and shaved ice; there are many such markets to choose from, some with stalls noted in the Michelin Guide (£160 for up to three people; tripadvisor.com).

For the first part of my trip I stay at the 303-room Mandarin Oriental Taipei, which I chose for its collection of 1,700 artworks, with 10 per cent by Taiwanese artists, including Nai-Wen Chang's calla lily sculptures. The hotel collaborates with the Kengo Kuma-designed Whitestone Gallery, in Neihu district, alongside other notable galleries, and specialises in postwar and contemporary art.

The hotel arranges a tour for me with the art expert Kayla Cho: "It's a vivid, dynamic market here," she says. "We host



Clockwise from below: Longshan Temple, in the Wanhua district of Taipei; the old town of Jiufen, 20 miles east of the city; a tea plantation in Pinglin district, 20 miles southeast; the skyline of the central business district

international art fairs and there are two art universities in Taipei." One new highlight is the Renzo Piano-designed Fubon museum of modern and contemporary art, in the high-end shopping and financial district of Xinyi (from £29; fubonartmuseum.org).

Cho explains that a unique thing about the city is the repurposing of buildings as art spaces and creative parks – such as the Red House, a former public market in Ximending, and the Songshan Cultural and Creative Park, an old tobacco factory that houses exhibitions and concept stores (songshanculturalpark.org). My favourite stores in Songshan are Trash Kitchen, an upcycling workshop, and One Love Taipei, selling goods made by indigenous people – there are 16 government-recognised tribes. Around the corner, don't miss the 24-hour Eslite bookshop , brimming with gift-worthy stationery (eslitecorp.com).

The Mandarin Oriental has been an institution in Taipei for more than a decade and offers a buttoned-up, Euro-accented brand of luxury, with formal afternoon tea in the Jade Lounge, Czech-crystal chandeliers and the unmissable Cantonese restaurant Ya Ge ("Elegant House"), which has maintained its Michelin star since the first Taiwan guide was published in 2018. However, for a hotel a little more au courant (with a third of the rooms but double the rates), you need only cross the street, which is just what I did for the second half of my trip.

Housed in a 17-floor steel and glass "modern mansion" and guarded by 1930s banyan trees, the new Capella Taipei is the work of the interior designer André Fu, who also dressed the Upper House hotel in his native Hong Kong and the recently refreshed penthouse at Claridge's in London.

"What I am most fascinated with in Taipei is its pace," he says. "There is a subtle sense of calmness in the air of the city that I find mesmerising."

Fu infuses this unexpected urban serenity into the 86 guest rooms with pale stone and woods, whispers of misty blues and the milky greens of a matcha latte. While parts of the hotel are theatrical and gallery-like, such as the 14th-floor lobby, there is still an intimacy here since Fu does residential exceedingly well (especially *rich* residential). It really is like nowhere else (see the private pool suites, a first for the city).

Capella Taipei is already the chicest spot in town, as evidenced by a private Prada event and a magazine shoot during my stay. Yet despite the international cachet and high-gloss dressing, there's a local heart. The hotel hosts tours to one-off stationery shops and hidden bakeries in the leafy alleys of the surrounding micro-neighbourhood of Minsheng; sketches commissioned from a local artist adorn the menus; and the blue magpie, Taiwan's endemic resident bird, influences the hotel's art, cocktails and even turn-down service.

It's the first five-star hotel to open in the city in ten years, and it's just the quiet-luxury calling card that Taipei needs to get it on the global radar.

Nicole Trilivas was a guest of the Mandarin Oriental Taipei, which has B&B doubles from £247 (mandarinoriental.com); the Capella Taipei, which has B&B doubles from £517 (capellahotels.com); and Cathay Pacific, which has London-Taipei returns from £817 (cathaypacific.com)

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The secret Atlantic Riviera

Carolyn Boyd explores a good old-fashioned seaside scene on the edge of the Pays de la Loire

As I admire the statue of Monsieur Hulot leaning over the railings at the peaceful St Marc-sur-Mer beach, I realise that something is missing. The bronze of the French comedy character – created and portrayed by Jacques Tati in the 1953 film *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* – is without its pipe.

“Are you on holiday here?” a French lady asks me. I reply that I am. “You know his pipe was stolen? Every time they replaced it, it just got cut off again.”

“What a shame,” I reply.

“They think it was the same person each time,” she says. “Someone somewhere has a nice collection of pipes. Now they don’t bother adding a new one and this stubby bit just looks like a cigarette.”

We chat for a while longer before she wanders off, reminiscent of one of the dreamy-eyed characters in the film.

I’m here with my husband and two children on the northernmost part of the Pays de la Loire coast, a sweep that is pinched between the mouth of the River Loire at St Nazaire and Le Croisic peninsula, 15 miles south of the regional border with Brittany.

It is peak holiday season and I’m curious to see how the French “do” the seaside here on the so-called Atlantic Riviera, a term coined for the 12-mile stretch of coast around the resort of La Baule-Escoublac because it has the same early 20th-century holiday history as the Côte d’Azur and Biarritz.

While Brits have cornered the market in fun-filled piers, donkey rides and knotted-handkerchief-clad visitors in deckchairs, here the French have the 1950s charm of the seaside resort St Marc-sur-Mer, the belle époque glamour of La Baule-Escoublac and the coastal villages on the Le Croisic, which curls around the Guérande salt marshes.

In our three days I barely hear and language other than French, and it feels as though I’ve discovered a little slice of the coast they haven’t shared.

After a swim between the mussel-clad rocks on St Marc-sur-Mer beach we venture into the restaurant Le France for a lunch comprising a retro-classic prawn cocktail made with grapefruit and avocado then moules-frites, given oomph by Curé Nantais cheese. The restaurant is on the beach, so as we eat I get a ringside view of the rocks, families fishing on the pontoon, children swimming in the sea and teenagers playing bat and ball. It comes with a soundtrack of the waves rushing gently to shore, seagull caws and the half-heard voices that characterise Tati’s hypnotic, heartwarming

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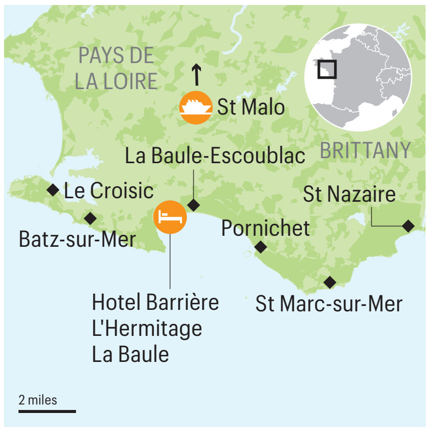


From far left: Hotel Barrière L'Hermitage La Baule; Le Croisic; a restaurant table at the hotel

film (mains from £15; restaurant-lefrance.com).

Later we drive west, past the holiday flats and residences of the coastal town of La Baule-Pornichet, and a gigantic beach opens out, stretching for more than five miles to La Baule-Escoublac. When the railway opened here in the late-19th century it signalled a new era. La Baule-Pornichet expanded, swallowing the village of Escoublac to become the larger La Baule-Escoublac.

Soon, elegant timber-fronted villas with gables and turrets, casinos and a horse-racing hippodrome were established between the towering maritime and cypress pines, planted in the 1820s to stabilise the dunes. Taking pride of place on the seafront is the 200-room Hotel Barrière L'Hermitage La Baule, which celebrates its centenary next year and is still the epitome of beach resort glamour. Our fifth-floor room offers a panorama of the beach, where people are taking sailing lessons, kite-surfing and swimming.

The next morning we use the hotel's free-to-borrow bikes to pedal through the pine-scented avenues. We take a spin around the Quartier des Oiseaux – so called because each of its winding avenues is named after a bird and where no-entry signs and quiet lanes make it something of a maze – before cycling out towards the neighbouring town of Le Pouliguen. Through trees and gates we spy villas that are beautifully maintained as holiday homes; others are more neglected, which make me wonder whether I would take on a fixer-upper, had I a spare million or so. Many have names such as Florence, Morgane or Carlita on their gables – a nod to their original owners or important figures of the time.

This feeling of following in the footsteps of generations of travellers to La Baule is a constant companion. As my son and I swim in the hotel pool later that afternoon my husband and daughter wave at us from our balcony, and I imagine the many generations of well-heeled French who have similarly peered down from the red-painted balconies of the majestic green, timber-framed façade.

The Monsieur Hulot statue at St Marc-sur-Mer beach

The next day we venture further west, to a peninsula with a decidedly Breton vibe. Although still strictly in the Pays de la Loire region, the villages of Batz-sur-Mer and Le Croisic fly the black-and-white flag of Brittany everywhere, serve galettes and celebrate the famed fleur de sel (salt crystals) harvested in the nearby marshes of southern Brittany.

It's market day in Batz-sur-Mer and the streets are buzzing. At the foot of the church tower we find a queue of people ready to climb its 184 steep steps. We buy tickets for a slot half an hour later from the lady in the booth opposite. Soon we're pacing up the steps to the top. It is worth the climb for the view, which encompasses Île de Noirmoutier to the south.

To the north are the Guérande marshes, where *paludiers* carefully sweep seawater through labyrinths of shallow ponds, eventually harvesting the salt when the sun has evaporated the water. At ground level it is hard to appreciate the 20 square miles of marshes that are embraced by the Le Croisic and La Turballe peninsulas, but from the top of the church tower we can see that the site is vast.

Looking down into the village we see the arched buttresses of the ruined Notre Dame du Mûrier Chapel and the colourful canopies of the market, which beckons us back down. After descending our heads are spinning a little. "Sit down there on the wall if you're feeling dizzy," says the ticket lady. We shake off our vertigo and head to the market, where stalls sell cheese, charcuterie, sachets of salt flakes, voluptuous peaches and glossy strawberries.

> **"The evening light bathes the blond sand in an ethereal halo**

We buy a few items for an impromptu picnic and saunter down the street to the St Michel beach and sit on the sand. The scene could be a film set, but there is no Monsieur Hulot this time; instead there are dozens of bright yellow beach huts and sentry boxes standing to attention along the seawall – cabins such as this have graced the seafront since the 1920s and were all painted yellow in 1957. We eat our market treats as children splash in the rock pools and others read on beach towels.

Our excursion continues as we follow the coastal road further west around the peninsula, passing cyclists, hikers, menhirs, sandy coves and thatched holiday cottages. The road eventually arrives at the harbour, bedecked by flowerpots and lined with restaurants and souvenir shops, where we buy tins of Breton sablé biscuits and salted caramels.

That evening, back at La Baule, we arrive for dinner at the hotel's sophisticated Ciro's restaurant, which leads onto the beach. The sublime evening light bathes the blond sand, sunloungers and neatly closed umbrellas in an ethereal halo. We order a sea bass baked in a Guérande salt crust that is delicate and delicious (mains from £22; ciros-restaurant.com).

As we eat I notice an equestrian outing from the hotel on the foreshore, the line of small ponies with a child on each saddle slowly walking the line between the wet sand and the incoming tide. It's beachside bliss.

I conclude that the Atlantic Riviera ticks all the boxes – all that is missing is a seaside hero's bronze pipe.

Carolyn Boyd was a guest of the Hotel Barrière L'Hermitage La Baule, which has B&B doubles from £260 (hotelsbarriere.com), and Brittany Ferries (brittany-ferries.co.uk); for more see labaule-guerande.com. Carolyn is the author of Amuse Bouche: How to Eat Your Way Around France (£10.99; timesbookshop.co.uk)

Awesome Egypt

The country's classic sights may be touristy but they're also mind-blowing – and your kids will agree, says *Martin Hemming*

"When are we going back to the hotel?" Nancy whined as I tried to perfect our family selfie in front of the Sphinx. To be fair to Nancy, she had that morning already "done" the Pyramids of Giza, including climbing inside one, up the sweltering, claustrophobic tunnel to Pharaoh Khufu's 4,500-year-old burial chamber, and absorbed an alfresco lesson from our guide that left us in no doubt that the pyramids definitely hadn't been built by either a) slaves or b) aliens. And now a sandstorm was blowing horizontally. Plus Nancy is four. Plus it was definitely past lunchtime.

Yes, we went to Egypt with the kids. Not a Red Sea all-inclusive, because of all our parenting achievements so far (no fillings, inoculations all up to date), teaching them to swim is something we have failed on. So instead at Easter we took Nancy and her big brother, Alasdair, seven, to experience the Egypt of really quite old stuff and to learn how mummies had their brains pulled out of their noses with knitting needles.

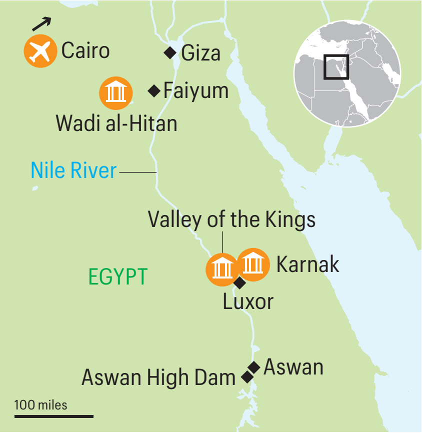
Sure it's "educational", if you want to become an Egyptologist or luxury tomb designer, but in truth it was mostly unashamedly touristy – basic, even? I've always wanted to go and I figured I don't have that long left before the kids get older and sassier and start rolling their eyes and accusing me of being, well, basic and touristy.

Just quickly, on the old stuff, and I know I'm not breaking the exclusive here: but blimey. I'll spare you all the adjectives and resort to one cliché: we did all the classics, at Giza, Aswan and Luxor, and, frankly, they blew me away. Yes, there are other tourists and the odd queue and stalls selling knock-off Mo Salah shirts (of which Alasdair is now a proud owner), but this is proper wish-list stuff and I can honestly say, save for Nancy's day one wobble at the Sphinx, that there was not one example of "not *another* temple/tomb/ornate sarcophagus" moaning. Because the old stuff we saw never got boring.

Here's King Tut's one (Valley of the Kings)! Here's the absolutely massive one (Karnak)! Here's the one they had to move and rebuild brick by brick when they built the Aswan Dam (Philae)! Or, a family fave, here's the one dedicated to – and why not? – crocodiles. The museum next door to Kom Ombo featured a glass cabinet filled with 22 mummified crocs.

It's clear that while we were living in mud huts and whittling the odd stick, the Egyptians were playing an artistic, cultural, civilisational blinder, and doing amazing things with reptiles and embalming fluid. The kids seemed pretty impressed, and if they hadn't been, I wouldn't have spoken to them again.

Of course, having other nice bits to break up all the (amazing) old stuff helped. And for that I have no qualms



JOHN DAMBIK; ELIZAVETA LARIONOVA; CTK/ALAMY; NICK BRUNDLE PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES

about recommending our tour operator, Stubborn Mule, which designs all kinds of lightly edgy family holidays. So there was the super-chilled afternoon felucca cruise – epic lunch and sunset dinner included – on the Nile at Aswan, us flopping about on mattresses on deck, playing Uno, spotting storks and waving to locals and camels on the bank. There was the £1-a-head lunch in a high street chain restaurant selling nothing but bowls of kid-friendly koshari (noodles, macaroni, rice, lentils, chickpeas and onions in tomato sauce). And this geography graduate particularly enjoyed the whistle-stop visit to the Aswan High Dam, which has been holding back the Nile and keeping Egypt in cheap hydroelectricity since 1970.

Our one foray away from the Nile was to the oasis town of Faiyum, a couple of hours southwest of Cairo, where Alasdair joyously sledged down sand dunes and Nancy laughed her head off as our 4x4 driver, Ali al-Abady, pulled all sorts of stomach-turning stunts down near-vertical sandy slopes. Remind me in 13 years time not to be nearby when she starts her driving lessons.

An unexpected highlight on this desert detour came during an unpromising-sounding visit to a pottery school in a little village called Tunis, set up in the 1980s by a Swiss woman called Evelyne Porret. I was expecting a quick tour then the hard sell for some overpriced napkin rings. Instead, within moments, Alasdair and Nancy had been whisked away by a teenage apprentice, who threw aprons round their necks and soon had them beaming with pride at the pots they'd just turned on an actual potter's wheel. We've brought home four lovely, reasonably priced glazed mugs from the shop, which have pushed the nice Habitat ones to the back of the cupboard. The kids' pots were rubbish, obviously, but they have their spot on the mantelpiece.

And just when we thought we'd completed all of Egypt's old stuff, we were deposited in the Unesco-listed Wadi al-Hitan, a bleak, dazzling desert valley that, it turns out, used to be the sea, which is why it's strewn with dozens of giant fossilised skeletons of prehistoric whales, ones with little hind limbs left over from when their ancestors lived on land. Age: just the 40 million years.

Only marginally more modern were our interlocking "first class" cabins on the No 86 sleeper train south from Cairo to – 13 hours and 40 minutes later – Aswan. The kids loved it, mainly because they got to eat their dinner of rice and grilled chicken off trays while sitting on a bunk bed, and because breakfast, also included, consisted of a vacuum-packed cake and crisps. They slept like mummies. Their mummy and I, in the top bunks, found it akin to trying to drop off inside a tumble dryer. Nevertheless, the Nile and the lush fields on its banks rolling by outside the window was quite the sight to wake up to, and made us feel very smug about not being on a basic, touristy Nile cruise ship.

Clockwise from main: the Pyramids of Giza; feluccas on the Nile; whale bones at Wadi al-Hitan; the Hemming family in Egypt; the Temple of Karnak in Luxor

HOW TO VISIT EGYPT WITH CHILDREN

The author MG Leonard visited Egypt in 2023 to research her latest children's book, *Hunt for the Golden Scarab*. Here are her top tips for getting the most out of a trip:

● Egypt gets very hot by midday so plan excursions for early in the morning. That way you can spend the afternoon swimming or reading by the pool. Be sure to pack relevant books for the children — perhaps Emma Carroll's excellent *Secrets of a Sun King*.

● Book excursions with a knowledgeable tour guide to understand what you are seeing — best done by choosing a package that includes an Egyptologist.

● Gamify the history by making a hieroglyphic treasure hunt — challenge your children to find the letters of their name on the temple wall.

● Consider booking extra activities, such as a hot-air balloon ride to the Valley of the Kings — most tour operators offer this for about £25pp. It's also worth buying the extra ticket to see Tutankhamun's tomb here (entry £11, tomb entry £11; egymonuments.com).

● To see the funerary treasures discovered by Howard Carter, visit the Egyptian Museum Cairo (£8; egyptianmuseumcairo.eg).

Hunt for the Golden Scarab by MG Leonard (Pan Macmillan £7.99) is out now. Her second book in the series, The Legend of Viking Thunder, is available from September 11

After that, the really nice hotels *really* helped, with their (shallow) pools and international buffet breakfasts (Nancy's standard order: Coco Pops, Nutella pancakes, washed down with a hot chocolate). A hotel you have to get to by boat is never not cool, and for that it would be hard to beat the Mövenpick in Aswan, on its own island in the Nile. But playing table tennis on the pool terrace of the Steigenberger Nile Palace in Luxor, river boats sliding past as our rallies slowly got longer, will be a holiday memory neither Alasdair nor I will forget.

And Nancy will never forget Adel Gebeely. Adel is a 47-year-old father of two from Giza, a sometimes farmer who self-published a pretty dark-sounding novel during lockdown. He was also our guide for the nine days in Egypt. Immaculately turned out every morning in chinos, pressed shirts, aviator sunglasses and a dazzling smile, he knew when to chuck in gobbets of actual history, when to leave us alone to explore, when to teach Alasdair a magic trick or to show Nancy how to write her name in hieroglyphics.

A common refrain from Adel throughout the trip was "You wait here" – "here" normally being in the shade, near a drink – while he went off to negotiate the latest bamboozling ticketing system at whatever wonder of the world we were at next. Forget Horus, Osiris and Mo Salah: Adel will always be the Hemmings' Egyptian god. I bet he has taught his kids to swim.

Adel also looked after – and this was a biggie – all the tipping, from waiters to camel wranglers. I'm all for cultural relativism, but tipping is, let's be honest, a total pain. I would have had a breakdown if the job of who gets what and when had fallen to me. "Tips included" is the deal on all Stubborn Mule's trips to Egypt and it's a stroke of faff-relieving genius. Is this lazy travelling? Perhaps. Did it save time, effort and probably several bust-ups with my wife? Definitely.

A quick note: you've probably read about the GEM, Cairo's giant, shiny new Grand Egyptian Museum, which finally opened, but only partially, last year. We were disappointed to discover its Tutankhamun and children's galleries were still not ready for our visit. But the collection, in neat chronological order, and the building, with its 11-metre statue of Ramses II in the lobby and very aggressive air conditioning, are mighty impressive. It also has an excellent ice-cream shop.

Go if you're in town, obviously, but do you need to wait for the GEM to be fully open, which might be by the end of this year? Not necessarily. I actually sort of preferred the rambling displays in the old (built 1901) Egyptian Museum in downtown Cairo, especially the mummified packed lunch of beef ribs, steaks and whole ducks from the tombs of Yuya and Thuya, a 14th-century BC nobleman and his wife. Because nobody wants to get peckish en route to the afterlife.

Things I'd change about our trip? I wouldn't do the camel ride at the pyramids if I had my time again. Camel-whipping should obviously go the way of pyramidal burial tombs. I also I wish I'd brought a cardigan to the GEM. And Alasdair would have liked to have played more table tennis.

Martin Hemming was a guest of Stubborn Mule, which has eight nights' B&B for a family of four from £9,800, including flights, an English-speaking guide, visits to key sights and activities (stubbornmuletravel.com)

Travel Middle East

JINU PHILIP MATHEW/SHUTTERSTOCK; LEONID ANDRONOV/ALAMY; RAMI MANSOUR

Why Bahrain is the pearl of the Middle East

A new trail links sites connected to the ancient pearl trade of the Gulf region, says *Sarah Turner*

'If you seek the pearl, be a diver," Rumi, the 13th-century Iranian poet and mystic, advised. He didn't anticipate the pearl museum in Bahrain. In a 19th-century coral stone building, adapted by the Dutch-born architect Anne Holtrop with equal amounts of oxidised silver and urban cool, there are thousands of gleaming Bahraini pearls on display, in jewellery created over the past century or so by Cartier. They include cascading rope necklaces, chandelier earrings and giant brooches in the shape of palm trees.

These most mysterious and unpredictable of jewels have been entwined with the history of this country since 2000BC. It is thought that a network of freshwater springs – on land and in the oyster beds in the sea – is what makes Bahraini pearls the most sought after in the world for their overall lustre, size and colour.

The museum is part of the newly completed Pearling Path, a two-mile self-guided trail between buildings related to the pearl industry on Muharraq Island, close to Manama, the capital. It's a great way to explore the history of this interesting country, and easy to do in an afternoon or morning.

Guided by Bader AlSaad, an art curator arranged by my hotel, I'm led inside a series of restored buildings ranging from old merchants' houses to mansions of dive captains that feature decorative wooden carvings.

Across all 17 buildings on the trail, the less lustrous side of the pearl trade isn't ignored. We see the huts where the divers lived until the 20th century and the stones that they tied to their feet to take them down to the seabed. Until scuba was invented, divers had to swim to depths of up to 30m, which often caused irreparable lung damage. Since they had to pay to be part of a voyage – often months long and in a tiny wooden boat – many fell into debt with the boat

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The Bahrain World Trade Center looms over Manama; inset, the ruins of Bahrain Fort, a Unesco site; below left, inside the Jumeirah Gulf of Bahrain

captains, essentially becoming all but enslaved unless they could find the sort of pearl that could set them up for life.

Despite the country's wealth being fuelled by its oil and gas reserves, pearls still have powerful cultural resonance in Bahrain.

"My mother started shucking oysters with some friends during Covid; now she does it most Friday nights with her best friend," AlSaad says.

Prices, he tells me, range from £10 for a bucket of oysters from the beds closest to the coastline to £200 for those from deeper beds. "She's got around 1,000 pearls from it."

Muharraq – the most charming of the 33 man-made Bahraini islands (there are more than 50 natural ones too), reached from Manama via a five-minute ride in a water taxi – is a joy to discover. With parts dating from the 1900s plus newly constructed shady squares – each with a water fountain and surrounded by a series of lanes mostly too narrow for cars – it has a charm that is akin to Shoreditch with sun and includes street lamps designed to look like giant pearls.

Between the Pearling Path buildings – all well signed and easy to find – are galleries and cafés, often combined in winning ways, such as the Dar Amana art collective, run by women (instagram.com/we.are.amana), or the newly opened Bread & Paper, a truly delicious deep dive into the heritage bread of the region, with deckchairs outside where AlSaad and I stop for a spicy beef bun and date iced tea, followed by a Yorkshire pudding-like dish with halva (set menu £12; Lane 1624). At Haneen Sedra, an iconoclastic little museum where we pop in on a whim, there are vintage packets of washing powder, 1990s flip phones and VHS tape recorders on display (free; Lane 939).

While much of the Middle East was historically home to nomadic Bedouin tribes, freshwater springs in Bahrain allowed more farming, particularly of dates. But it was the pearls that made the country one of the most important trading ports in the Persian Gulf.

There has been a Hindu community here for several centuries, and as I wander around the souk area in Manama, the shops selling gold give way to stalls heaped with marigold garlands and incense. When Japan first created cultured pearls in the 1930s, natural pearls from the Persian Gulf lost their rarity value, but they are still traded. The Mattar family business, which supplied Jacques Cartier with pearls on his first trip to Bahrain in 1912, is now on its sixth generation of owners. In the Al Aali Mall, near the souk, the daughters of the family have taken charge of the design process and brought new verve with innovations such as contrasting pearl colours and modernist settings. Their jewellery is beautiful but well out of my price bracket, with pendants costing from £1,100.

According to a friend who lives in Dubai, Bahrain is the Las Vegas of the Middle East – well, perhaps if Vegas was on an island in the Gulf and operated under sharia, though the vast Formula 1 stadium does give off Nevada energy. For visitors at least, there is still an easy-going charm here compared with some other countries in the region – it is possible to buy alcohol in Bahrain, even from drive-through shops.

However, the country also

Continued on page 23➔

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➔ **Continued from page 21**

has 6th-century forts, used by successive waves of invaders, including Greeks, Persians and the Portuguese. There are burial mounds dating from 2000BC among the three Unesco world heritage sites here (they can be seen from the road) and an uninterrupted coastline of glorious natural beaches punctuated by clubs and holiday houses.

Most of the hotels in Bahrain are in or near the capital, but I'm staying at the Jumeirah Gulf of Bahrain, in the southwest, 40 minutes' drive from Manama. Opened in 2022, it's a proper resort hotel. There are five swimming pools and a spa, plus a 500m stretch of fine white sand, tennis courts and water sports. During my stay fellow guests include Europeans in search of winter sun and a significant number of Dubai-dwellers who have hopped over on the one-hour flight, as well as guests from other parts of the Middle East. Bahraini food reflects the country's trading links with India and Iran. Machboos (chicken with dried limes) and samak safi (fish marinated with sumac and turmeric) are delicately spiced.

It turns out that another thing Rumi didn't anticipate was the way a really good resort hotel aims to make life memorable for its guests – one of the activities that the Jumeirah offers is the chance to shuck oysters in the hope of finding pearls.

The pearls worn by Queen Elizabeth II probably came from the oyster beds here. The ones in the drop earrings that the Princess of Wales often wears definitely do – they were a wedding present to Queen Elizabeth II from the Emir of Bahrain in 1947. It is estimated that only one oyster in 10,000 from the Bahrain seabed will reveal a pearl big enough to be sold as a jewel, though one in ten will have a seed pearl.

JINU PHILIP MATHEW, TRABANTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK; RAMI MANSOUR

From left: buildings along the Pearling Path trail on Muharraq Island; a view of Manama from the Gulf; a swimming pool at the Jumeirah Gulf of Bahrain

I sit at a long table close to the beach with other hotel guests. Ali Hussain Mushaima, a fisherman, has brought buckets of oysters and, with a shucking knife and his tuition, I start to picture the earrings I'll have made with the pearls that I'll find; perhaps a pendant too.

> “I start to picture the earrings I'll have made with the pearls I find

After an hour I accept that I'm becoming better at opening the slippery grey oyster shells than making my fortune. After prising apart about 30 oysters, my grand total is three tiny seed pearls (value: basically nothing). Others around the table have done better; one oyster had three pearls. But at least my haul represents a souvenir that is significantly cooler than a fridge magnet.

Sarah Turner was a guest of Jumeirah Hotels, which has B&B doubles from £210 (jumeirah.com); for more see pearlingpath.bh. Fly to Bahrain

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MY HOLS TIM SIADATAN

I hope Iran becomes safe for travelling

The restaurateur on the places that shaped his palate and a disastrous Caribbean trip

Tim Siadatan, 42, is a chef and co-founder of the London restaurants Padella and Trullo. Known for his seasonal, produce-led Italian cooking, he was one of the inaugural cohort on Jamie Oliver's Fifteen trainee programme in 2002. Siadatan grew up in Reading and now lives in Somerset with his wife, Daisy, and their two children, Luna, seven, and Inca, four

DALIBOR BRLEK/ALAMY

Tim Siadatan visited the island of Vis, Croatia, with his family this summer

“My family visited Italy when I was 14 and it marked the moment my palate started to change. We rented a big old classic farmhouse in the Marche region, which was sort of run-down but perfect for our family set-up. We weren't crazy foodies – I was one of six kids and with so many mouths to feed, meals were mostly straightforward.

I vividly remember eating a tomato and thinking, “Oh my God!” I didn't know they could taste like that. And the olive oil, wow. It wasn't far from the Adriatic, so we ate lots of anchovies and sardines too. I was a teenager of the Nineties in Reading, so, like other kids at the time, that wasn't what I was used to. It was a seminal moment as it introduced me to seasonal food.

I did an epic three-month backpacking trip with some buddies in southeast Asia when I was 17 or 18. We got up to everything teen backpackers get up to – I was on a shoestring budget, but in Thailand I figured I could do something like pot washing in exchange for accommodation and meals. These older ladies were making big vats of green curry and while we couldn't communicate through language we'd sit down after a shift and communicate through food. We'd be in stitches laughing and it was the meal bringing us together. I remember thinking: “Look at this, the power of food.” I was eating these spicy dishes, crunchy salads and tropical fruit I'd never been exposed to. Another seed was planted: not just new flavours, but the communal vibe.

Cambodia struck me because you could feel the recent atrocities – I'd never seen so many amputees and scarred faces. Going to the Killing Fields knocked me sideways.

My wife, Daisy, and I went to Barbuda in the Caribbean for our first holiday together ... and it was a disaster. The hotel looked great online, but when we rocked up it was horrific. The cabins were filthy, the beach was covered in sandflies and the food? Inedible. Within 24 hours we had to get out, but it was New Year and tricky. We ended up spending a fortune getting some rinky-dink seaplane to Antigua and eventually found somewhere amazing.

We've had some shockers with the kids too. It wasn't Île de Ré, it was us. It all sounded great on paper – cycling around with little trailers, stopping for oysters and crémant – and for most, it is. But it was like an English summer with lots of rain. We had an 18-month-old and a four-year-old, and somewhere halfway someone wanted a poo and they definitely didn't want to be sitting eating oysters. Daisy and I were looking at each other going, “What are we doing?”, so we drove home.

We've learnt our lesson now. This summer we went sailing in Croatia, mooring in bays, waterskiing and jumping into the sea, which was a surprising success. There was a bit of concern about our youngest being on a boat for a week, but once we got into it we sort of simmered the anxiety and it was a really magical time with all the cousins together. Vis is synonymous with Italian food and really pretty – the coves around there are breathtaking.

I go to Italy at least three times a year, mostly on sourcing trips and producer visits. We've done Tuscany around November for the olive oil harvest for the last 15 years. I was in Sicily last summer – Cattaneo, Etna, Menfi and then Pantelleria, a little island. That was pure magic.

Verona has better restaurants than most places I know in Italy pound for pound, so it's a good spot to take chefs. There's a misconception that there are good restaurants everywhere in the country, but that's not my experience. The great food is happening in people's houses.

One of my best trips was to a village called Nerano on the Amalfi coast. There are lots of average restaurants there, but there are a handful of gems tucked in the coves for those in the know. There's this family-run hotel, Lo Scoglio – the rooms are straightforward but it has an incredible restaurant, one of the best in the world, in my opinion. They have a farm up the hillside and grow their own produce: the food is to die for.

It's on a jetty near a shingly beach full of bronzed Neapolitans in Speedos smoking Marlboro Reds. Everyone's a bit doughy so you feel quite good on the beach. Daisy and I had just come out the other side of our first kid and the classic stuff of not sleeping, blah, blah, blah. This was the first time it clicked.

I'm half-Iranian and all my Persian family wax lyrical about the country. My mum, who's English, spent time there when she was younger, but throughout my adult life there's just been constant turmoil. It's a crying shame. I hope within my lifetime we'll see things simmer down and that it becomes somewhere that you can travel to and feel safe.”

Interview by Blossom Green

Padella: Iconic Pasta at Home by Tim Siadatan is out on Thursday (Bloomsbury Publishing £25)

COMPETITION

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WHERE WAS I?

Today we're remembering a consequential person (mother: Anne) — born in a fine riverside residence that once stood on this spot. But we're not impressed by its flat memorial stone. “Still, this place is not short of palatial edifices,” Friend says, noting those to port and starboard.

“No prizes for guessing who was their first architect-in-chief,” I tell him. “Check out those domes and columns.”

Our visit coincides with an annual contest. It finishes at a nearby vessel that also did some long-distance racing. Friend suggests that we take a look, but I too need some exercise, so I suggest that we climb to the brow of a hill half a mile south-southeast of us — then, 250 yards east of it, we can examine the remains of a tree linked to our consequential person.

Friend whines the whole way, until I remind him of the hearts of oak who studied in those edifices below us. “I bet they used to run up here before breakfast,” I tell him.

We're early, and as we wait for 1pm we consider where to go next. I suggest a venue on a peninsula that shares its name with this area.

“No thanks,” he says. “I was there three years ago, for a concert.”

“Anyone good?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says. “Queen.”

Sean Newsom

THE QUESTIONS

1 What was our consequential person's first name?
2 What was the architect-in-chief's surname?

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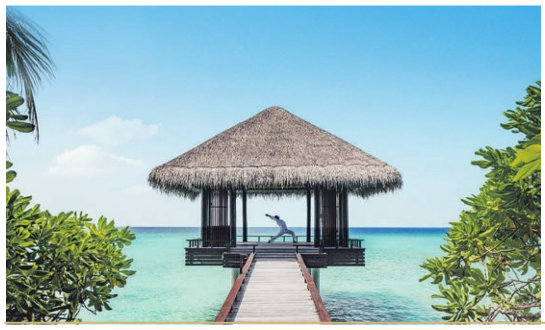

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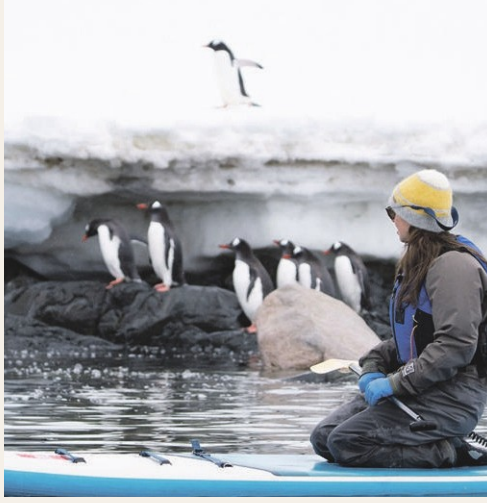
Prefer land to sea? Not all cold is ocean-bound. Dog sled across Norway's endless white or feel the adrenaline surge on a snowmobile through Svalbard's glacial valleys. Iceland glitters in ice caves and geysers, and further west, Canada's Ungava Bay reveals tundra and taiga forests that stretch to the horizon, with the northern lights rippling across a sky unpolluted by city glare.

Inuit traditions in Greenland remain rooted in respect for sea and ice. In northern Finland, Sami herders still guide reindeer across snowy pastures, their knowledge handed down through generations. To travel here is to share meals, learn crafts and hear stories that reveal how culture adapts in the harshest of climates.

What does it mean to stand in a place where the sun never rises over the horizon? To watch a sky alive with shifting auroras? To feel small beneath the immensity of ice? Travellers often speak of how time slows; priorities shift and perspectives widen in these environments. Steppes Travel believe travel should leave more than photographs: it should provoke questions, spark curiosity and create stories that endure long after the ice has melted from your boots.



Behind every Steppes journey are experts who know these regions deeply, such as Sue and Roxy. Sue's obsession with the polar regions began in the late 90s on an expeditionary voyage to the Antarctic Circle. For Roxy, what started as a spark of curiosity for landscapes whilst studying geology grew into a lifelong love of travel. Their knowledge is more than logistical; it's personal. They understand not just where to go, but how to go. Their insights shape travel that's not only seamless but meaningful; travel that matches your sense of adventure.

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Hunt the northern lights in Lapland this winter with The Aurora Zone. During their four-night Window to the Northern Lights holiday, you'll stay in your own glass-roofed cabin, where you can watch the aurora dance from the comfort of your bed.

By day you will enjoy incredible experiences: from husky safaris and snowmobiling to reindeer sleigh rides and photography workshops. At night you will hunt the aurora with experts and return to continue your quest from your cabin. With solar activity levels still at their peak, there's never been a better time to travel.

Working with their partners at British Airways, The Aurora Zone include direct flights from Gatwick, providing a seamless journey from London to Lapland.

There are extremely limited spaces to travel this December. The direct flight route continues until the end of March, ideal for ticking the northern lights off your bucket list!

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Discover a hidden jewel in the western Balkans with Emporia: an exclusive 12-room boutique resort that thrives year-round on 44 hectares of vineyard-draped hills. Each season brings its own charm, from winter cosiness to summer sunsets.

The fine dining restaurant pairs dishes with artisan wines, blending ancient and modern techniques. Meanwhile, guests are pampered in rooms with breathtaking views, making it perfect for small events and an ideal setting for 21st-century nomads looking for immersive luxury and a beautiful place to work.

Conveniently close to Mostar International Airport and major regional airports, Emporia offers a blend of culinary artistry and serene luxury.

For more, visit *emporia.ba*, email *office@emporia.ba* or call (+387) 63 345 097.

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Nestled in the heart of the Maldives, Adaaran Prestige Vadoo is the epitome of romance and exclusivity. This adults-only, all-water-villa resort offers an intimate sanctuary for couples, honeymooners and empty nesters seeking a serene escape. With its iconic overwater villas featuring private pools, Jacuzzis and direct ocean access, every detail is designed to deliver an unparalleled experience.

Renowned for its vibrant house reef, the resort is a haven for snorkelling and diving enthusiasts. Guests can indulge in world-class dining at this premium all-inclusive resort with a variety of culinary options, including authentic Japanese and Maldivian cuisine. Exclusive experiences, such as romantic sandbank picnics and sunset fishing adventures, add a touch of magic to your stay.

With a focus on personalised service, sustainable practices and modern amenities, Adaaran Prestige Vadoo invites you to discover the perfect blend of romance, tranquillity and adventure in one of the world's most breathtaking destinations.

Visit *adaaran.com/prestigevadoo* for more information and to book.

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All-in-one vlog camera drone

DJI is a tech powerhouse that is redefining aerial imaging. Since its inception in 2006, it has led the global drone market by delivering high-quality drones alongside gimbals, stabilized cameras and industrial aerial solutions—allowing customers to capture amazing video footage, high-end professional imagery and treasured memories.

They do this through an unparalleled commitment to R&D, a culture of constant innovation and curiosity and a focus on transforming complex technology into easy-to-use devices. Building on the ethos of 'form follows function' their products combine advanced technology with dynamic designs.

Their standout drone, the DJI Flip, is shaking up the drone scene with a compact body that folds neatly into your pocket. It's ideal for anyone who wants high-quality aerial footage, without the bulk. Designed for ease, it's ready to fly within seconds and captures smooth, stabilized 4K video even in windy conditions.

It has built-in tracking, gesture controls and cinematic presets to help users get creative quickly, while obstacle avoidance tech keeps flights stress-free. With up to 28 minutes of battery life and seamless app connectivity, sharing from sky to screen takes no time at all.

Whether you're hiking, road-tripping or just capturing moments in the park, the Flip is built for spontaneity and catered to everyone, you don't need to be a tech genius. It's a smart, powerful option in a space where drones are often too complicated or oversized for casual creators.

The DJI Flip: making flying feel simple and creativity feel limitless.

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dji

The ghostly theatre of steam

Built in 1882 across the ancient land of the High Weald, it's hardly surprising that the Bluebell Railway has its own ghost stories. The ethereal nun, the demon stationmaster and the tragic tale of the newlyweds... the past and present collide at the famous heritage railway.

Steam locomotives have their own tales to tell too, with fatal accidents in the distant past and the loyal crew who never leave them. Now, you can experience the darker side of a historic place which normally offers wholesome family days out. Be warned, you may never come back!

New for 2025 and the first of its kind in the UK, The Ghost Train, running from the 25th to the 31st of October, is a show like no other, featuring a full-size steam ghost train. This isn't a fairground ride; it's tangible, it's real — or is it?

Be shocked to the core as the demonic ghost train appears, piercing the night with its haunting cry. Step aboard and meet the ghosts of the Bluebell Railway in a spine-tingling immersive theatrical experience, unlike anything ever seen on a heritage railway in the UK.

Roam the dark platforms of a station of yesteryear. Where are you? Is it purgatory? Experience the chilling finale and try to make it safely back to the real world.

Recommended for adults or families with older children only.

Watch the spooky trailer and book for an experience like no other at *bluebell-railway.com/special/the-ghost-train*

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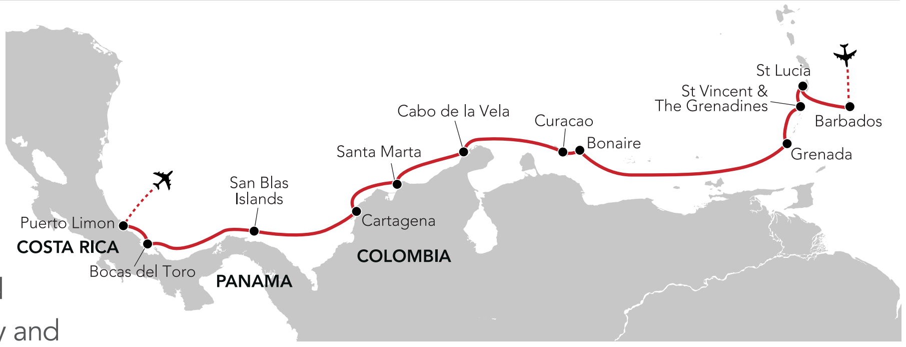
The School Travel Company

NOBLE CALEDONIA

RAINFORESTS, CORALS & CULTURES OF THE CARIBBEAN

A passage from Barbados to Costa Rica including Colombia & Panama
aboard the MS Hebridean Sky – **1st to 16th February 2027**

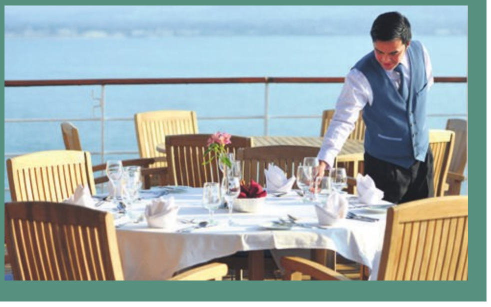


When it comes to pure escapism there are few places in the world more fitting than the Caribbean, particularly during the UK's winter months. Escape the cold at home, join just 100 fellow travellers aboard the MS Hebridean Sky in Barbados and set sail on our island hopping voyage through sub-tropical waters to Costa Rica. Every island we will call into on the way has its own culture and this colourful mix of island personalities, varied terrain and lifestyles makes for a marvellous winter break. By and large we will head for the smaller, less visited islands, our small ship providing an easy and comfortable base from which to explore the region and enabling us to visit some small islands and ports which the larger cruise vessels simply cannot access.

We will explore historical sites and forts of the Spanish, Dutch and British colonial periods combined with the pretty ports, pastel painted towns, wonderful beaches and the flora and fauna of the region. As we sail relatively short distances, we have the benefit of full days on many of the glorious islands allowing for time to join the included, guided excursions combined with the opportunity to explore further independently or perhaps relax on one of the beautiful beaches.

Our flexible itinerary and knowledgeable onboard team will enable us to make the most of each day whether we are landing on tropical beaches by Zodiac, searching for endemic flora and fauna or learning about the history and culture of the islands. There are many ships cruising the Caribbean waters but if you prefer a chance to explore in small groups and to visit the smaller islands and off the beaten track destinations then this is the trip for you.

MS HEBRIDEAN SKY is one of the finest small ships in the world and offers exceptionally spacious and well-designed suites, beautifully appointed public areas and high standards of service and food. The vessel accommodates just 118 passengers and suites feature a seating area and some have a private balcony. The spacious and finely decorated public rooms include a lounge, elegant bar, library with internet access and a single seating dining room. Outside there is a rear sun deck where meals are served in warm weather under shade, a bar, observation area and comfortable deck furniture. The atmosphere on board is akin to a private yacht or country hotel and you can be assured that after a day of exploration ashore you will return to the comfort and peace of a well-run and luxuriously appointed comfortable small ship.



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THE ITINERARY IN BRIEF

Day 1 London to Barbados. Fly by scheduled flight. Arrive this afternoon and transfer to the MS Hebridean Sky in Bridgetown.

Day 2 Barbados. This morning we will take a scenic drive along the west coast of Barbados with its beautiful beaches, elegant hotels and quaint boutiques to the north of the island where we take in the incredible views of the Atlantic surf, blowholes, caves and shallow pools. Enjoy a stroll on the sand at the surfing beach of Bathsheba before continuing to St John's Church which stands on a cliff face, 800 feet above sea level, with spectacular views. Our tour will end at the Sunbury Plantation which was built in 1660 and today provides an insight into life in bygone years.

Day 3 St Lucia. St Lucia is a splendidly rugged island of towering mountains, lush green valleys and acres of banana plantations. We will anchor in sight of St Lucia's best-known feature, the twin peaks of the Pitons which rise dramatically from the sea to more than 2400 feet. In the nearby town of Soufriere we can visit the bubbling sulphur springs, part of a low lying volcano which erupted thousands of years ago. Our tour will also include the splendid botanical gardens.

Day 4 St Vincent & The Grenadines. Arrive this morning in bustling Kingstown, capital of St Vincent and gateway to The Grenadines. We will drive to the outskirts of the city to the 19th century Fort Charlotte before continuing to one of the oldest botanical gardens in the western hemisphere which date from 1765 and were developed to provide medicinal plants. Over lunch we sail to Bequia and have the afternoon on this delightful Grenadine island. Only seven miles by two it is a long way from the well beaten tourist track, a serene and peaceful island with some of the best beaches in the Caribbean. We will use the Zodiacs to land at Port Elizabeth where we will have time to explore at our own pace or wander to a nearby beach.

Day 5 Grenada. Explore this wonderful Windward Island which many regard as the most beautiful in the Caribbean. It is a lush and verdant island with spice plantations, rum distilleries, tropical forests, secluded coves, nature trails and select hotels which cling to the hillsides overlooking the ocean. We will moor in the picturesque capital of St George's before heading to Fort George. We will continue to a spice garden where we learn about the herbs that grow here before we end at one of the island's rum distilleries.

Day 6 At Sea. Spend a relaxing day at sea.

Day 7 Bonaire, Dutch Caribbean. Spend the day in Bonaire, famous for the variety of its corals, fish and clear waters. This morning you may wish to take a scenic island tour to see the saltwater lagoon at Lake Goto, where we may be lucky and see pink flamingos, followed by Mangazina di Rei cultural park which showcases indigenous culture. Alternatively, join a local boat as we make our way to one of the nearby uninhabited islands near Klein Bonaire. Here, there will be the option to swim from the beach or snorkel over the coral reefs. Returning to the MS Hebridean Sky for lunch, the afternoon is free to explore the town of Kralendijk.

Day 8 Curacao. Moor this morning at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Willemstad. The city has a rich history dating back to the 16th century and the island's colonial Dutch heritage sets a genteel tone amid markets, museums and cafes. Enjoy an excursion to explore the historic downtown district including Fort Amsterdam.

Day 9 Cabo de la Vela, Colombia. Arrive in Colombia in the far northwestern region of La Guajira, an area of wild desert, beautiful landscapes and stunning beaches that border the Caribbean Sea. This is an area sacred to the indigenous Wayuu people who have lived in the region for over 2,000 years since relocating from the Amazon rainforest. Visiting a community, our local guides will teach us about their culture and we will see some of the crafts including the famous Mochila bags.

Day 10 Santa Marta. We continue our exploration of Colombia in the Santa Marta area which is renowned for the eco-diversity and dramatic beauty of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the highest coastal mountain range in the world, that sweep down to the sea. From our berth we will travel slightly inland to the Tayrona National Park this morning. Covered in large part by virgin tropical forest, the park is home to many varied species of mammals, birds and reptiles. On a walk through this semi-tropical jungle we will be joined by a local guide who will offer insights into the park's vegetation, animals and ecosystem. Alternatively, explore the town of Santa Marta, see Bolivar Plaza and the bustling streets with their eclectic mix of Spanish Colonial, Republican and contemporary architecture, and the 17th century cathedral, Colombia's oldest church.

Day 11 Cartagena. Cartagena is one of the most fascinating cities in South America and this morning we will enjoy a walking tour of the colonial walled city which is virtually surrounded by water and steeped in history, with a wealth of 16th and 17th century buildings and churches. Our guides will bring the history of the city to life as we walk its streets and ramparts. We will visit the 16th century Fort of San Felipe, the Monastery of San Pedro Claver, Plaza de la Aduana and Iglesia de Santo Domingo.

Day 12 San Blas Islands, Panama. After a morning at sea we arrive in the stunning San Blas archipelago. The archipelago is made up of over 400 islands that line the north coast of Panama with white sandy beaches set in a turquoise sea. The islands are home to the indigenous Kuna Indians who maintain their traditional way of life including the production of colourful fabric art known as 'molas'. We will have time to take a nature walk or perhaps enjoy a swim from the beach.

Day 13 Bocas del Toro. Today we arrive in the Bocas del Toro archipelago, pristine islands which are now part of a national marine park. This afternoon we will visit the small town of Bocas del Toro and have free time to wander amongst the fine old Spanish buildings or maybe visit one of the local beaches.

Day 14 Puerto Limon, Costa Rica. Arriving into Costa Rica we head to the Cahuita National Park. The area is filled with wildlife that includes howler monkeys, white-faced capuchin monkeys, raccoons, sloths, otters, coatis, agoutis, armadillos and porcupines. Several avian species also live in the swamp forest. Our naturalist guides will lead us through the trails of the rainforest, sharing their vast knowledge of this fragile ecosystem. Alternatively, take a boat ride through the scenic Tortuguero canals, known as the Costa Rican Amazon as the surrounding rainforest supports a wide range of flora and fauna. Here we can hopefully sight waterfowl, monkeys, lizards, sloths and toucans.

Day 15 Puerto Limon to London. Disembark and transfer to San Jose airport for our scheduled flight to London.

Day 16 London. Arrive this morning.

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NB. Ports and itinerary are subject to change. All special offers are subject to availability. Travel insurance is not included in the price. Zodiacs will be used during this voyage. Our current booking conditions apply to all reservations.

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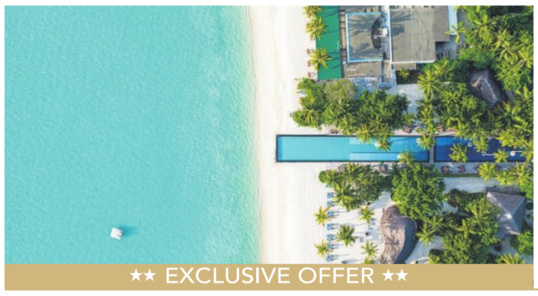
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48 HOURS IN... STAVANGER

This gateway to the Norwegian fjords is celebrating its 900th anniversary, says *Kerry Walker*

ALAN KEITH BEASTALL, ROBERT HAASMANN/ALAMY

With front-row views of the storm-smashed North Sea and the Lysefjord – of knife-edge Pulpit Rock fame – the backdrop of Stavanger is off-the-charts beautiful. The third biggest Norwegian city, 200 miles southwest of Oslo, made its fortune first in sardine canning then oil. These days it is a city-break winner, with an old town filled with timbered charm, on-the-pulse street art courtesy of the Nuart Festival and a food scene buoyed by renowned chefs on first-name terms with local fishermen, farmers and foragers.

This year Stavanger marks its novocentenary celebrations with island festivals, music, dance, theatre, exhibitions and nature-led art (stavanger 2025.no). And its petite scale means that you can breeze from city streets to fjordside cliffs in no time.

The Lysefjord; main, Ovre Holmegate in the centre of the city

DAY 1

MORNING

Gamle Stavanger, the old quarter on the west side of the harbour, throws you in at the historic deep end. Wander its cobbled lanes, with more timber buildings than anywhere else in Norway. Whitewashed and festooned with flower boxes, these cottages from the 18th and 19th centuries whisper of neighbourly one-upmanship. At Viking House, a VR experience wings you back to an age when these warriors ruled the waves (£13; vikinghouse.no).

Eat at Fisketorget

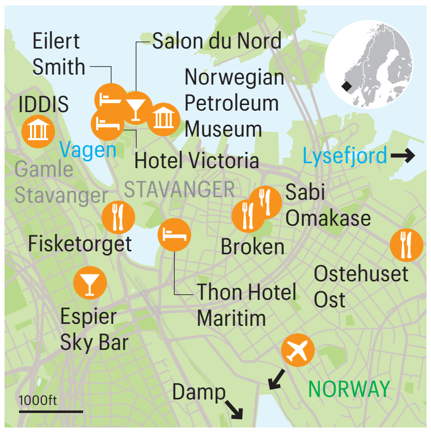
There's always a buzz at this glass-walled bistro and fishmonger by the water. Out front, one of Antony Gormley's 23 *Broken Column* figures, based on a cast of his body, gazes out to sea. Fresh seafood is served simply – go for a shrimp sandwich with red onion and aioli or creamy fish soup drizzled with chive oil (mains from £22; fisketorget-stavanger.no).

AFTERNOON

Retrace your steps back along Vagen, the harbour area, to Gamle Stavanger and IDDIS, a museum devoted to printing and canning. More entertaining than it sounds, the hands-on cannery museum zooms in on how sardines kept the economy afloat until the 1950s. Give sardine packing a whirl (£11; iddis.no).

Drink at Espier Sky Bar

On the 14th floor of the Clarion Hotel, this glass-fronted bar has a spy theme. Sink a signature Octopussy cocktail (vodka, apricot, plum saké, pistachio and Greek yoghurt) while using the binoculars to peer over the city's gabled rooftops and harbour (cocktails from £14; espier.no).



EVENING

As lights twinkle over the harbour, work up an appetite with a walk through the lanes of the city, homing in on mural-splashed, bar-lined Ovre Holmegate, its most colourful street.

Eat at Sabi Omakase

Book ahead for a table at this ten-place, Michelin-starred wonder. Roger Joya puts a Nordic spin on sushi using local seafood – try the reindeer sashimi and salmon belly nigiri with wild garlic – each bite is a revelation (18-course set menu £220; omakase.no).

DAY 2

MORNING

The fjords are calling, so get an early start for a two-hour Rib safari on the Lysefjord. Bumping across blue waters at speeds of up to 40mph, the scenery is so lovely that you will pinch yourself, with caves, crash-bang falls and cliffs punching up to Pulpit Rock, at 604m (1,981ft). As your captain regales you with stories, keep a watchful eye out for seals, porpoises and sea eagles (£100; fjordevents.no).

Eat at Ostehuset Ost

Back on land it's a five-minute bus ride to the revamped industrial east of the city and this cool, relaxed bakery café in a born-again factory. Light lunches – such as smoked salmon focaccia with aioli and local cheeses with home-baked bread – are delivered to bare-wood tables (sandwiches from £13; ostehuset.no).

AFTERNOON

An architectural showstopper built from concrete, glass and steel to resemble an oil platform rising from bedrock, the Norwegian Petroleum Museum races you from the first 1960s rigs to ultra-modern undersea systems. The interactive rescue chute and catastrophe room are lots of fun (£13; norskolje.museum.no).

Drink at Salon du Nord

Opened as a barber's shop in 1900, Hotel Victoria's bar still fizzes with art nouveau style, with high ceilings, polished wood and marble. Cocktails include the herby Doctor Fenrik, a potent concoction of dill aquavit, hibiscus sherry and tea caviar (cocktails £13; salondunord.no).

EVENING

Wind down your final evening with a relaxing session at one of the city's floating saunas. Damp has several locations around Stavanger, and its wood-fired saunas on Dokkgata, near the city centre, accommodate up to ten people (from £11 an hour; dampsauna.no).

> “ Bump across blue waters, past falls and cliffs up to Pulpit Rock

Eat at Broken Tables are like gold dust at this 25-seat restaurant, where Alan Kaye carefully crafts each dish with a passion for seasonal local ingredients. Dishes such as scallop ceviche with fermented tomato caviar and lovage snow and smoked cream with rhubarb, chocolate shell and coffee cream are highly unusual and absolutely delicious (set menus from £90; restaurantbroken.no).

Kerry Walker was a guest of Region Stavanger/Edge of Norway (edgeofnorway.com)

Need to know

Getting there and around

Norwegian flies direct to Stavanger from Gatwick in an hour and 40 minutes (norwegian.com). Buses to the centre take about half an hour (£13; flybussen.no). The city is walkable, or use bikes via the Kolumbus app (free for 15 minutes then 10p a minute). Hop on local buses to venture further (from £3; kolumbus.no).

Visit sustainably

Explore the country by rail. The Jaeren Line runs south from Stavanger, past beaches and sand dunes, to the port city of Egersund (an hour, £9; vy.no). The Sorlandet Line to Oslo (eight hours, £30) stops at Kristiansand, the summer capital with great seafood and museums.

Where to stay

THON HOTEL MARITIM

Budget digs by the lake

The Thon chain gets modern Scandi living right, and it's hard to knock this central three-star pick. It is next to lake-splashed Byparken for morning strolls and two minutes' walk from the city's medieval cathedral. The rooms are light and unfussy, with parquet floors. Generous breakfasts and a gym sweeten the deal (B&B doubles from £105; thonhotels.com).

HOTEL VICTORIA

Art nouveau grande dame

This harbour-facing redbrick hotel welcomed the king of Siam a few years after its 1900 opening. Rooms recall the grace of the era, with subtle greens and greys, geometric prints and a touch of gold. Breakfast in the brasserie is a blow-out affair, with fresh pastries, eggs, cold cuts, pancakes, the works (B&B doubles from £123; hotel-victoria.no).

EILERT SMITH

Modernist luxury with sea views

Boutique has become a bit of a catch-all but Eilert Smith nails it with 12 individually designed rooms reflecting its 1930s architecture. Re-Naa, its three-Michelin-star restaurant, specialises in seafood. The hotel has an avant garde air, with the original curves and geometric patterns and modernist materials such as travertine, brass, marble and wood (B&B doubles from £390; slh.com).

Mistakes I've made … travelling with my dog

Chris Haslam shares the highs and lows of holidaying with his four-legged friend Dave

Chris and Dave at Normans Bay, East Sussex

CHRIS HASLAM

The joys of travelling with my Jack Russell terrier, Dave T Dog, are many, but getting to the stage of man and dog on the road in perfect harmony isn't easy. Here are just nine of the mistakes I've made in the five years we've been striking out together.

THE CAGE

When I first got Dave, a bloke in a pub told me that I needed a pet carrier within which to transport him on European highways. I have no recollection why I thought a plasterer would be an expert on EU traffic regulations, but when I set off for the Eurostar terminal on our first overseas trip, Dave was behind bars in a £270 plastic dog box. Behaving exactly like the Tasmanian Devil from the old Looney Tunes cartoons, he seemed uneasy with confinement and when he realised that escape was impossible he began barking. And when he stopped barking he'd forgotten that escape was impossible and returned to full-on Taz mode. And so on, all 750 miles to Marseille. When we arrived – frazzled – my French friend told me that no one else used a cage because a £5 dog seat belt was perfectly acceptable.

THE TENT

While camping on the Pembrokeshire coast I was woken some time after midnight by a sea breeze on my face. In the light of my torch I noticed a ragged hole in the door of the inner tent and the very obvious absence of a Jack Russell. Clearly there was no way he had been ready for bed while there were badgers to bait, so he'd chewed and tunnelled his way out. Impressive, but the simple addition of a D-ring stitched into the groundsheet has thwarted further escapes.

THE FIGUREHEAD

Clad in his yellow lifejacket and safety line, Dave sat on the foredeck of my kayak like a furry Georgian figurehead as we paddled around the Summer Isles in Highland. He was the perfect first mate, until we headed into Badentarbet beach in a moderate swell. Our approach was noticed by tourists, some of whom began filming the cute puppy on the canoe. Dave posed, as he does, but then a seal popped up. He went for it and as I reached for his harness the boat went beam on to the surf and capsized in 4ft of water. Oh, how they laughed.

THE RANGE

In November 2023 I set out to see whether Dave and I could walk the 36 miles from Cromer to Hunstanton. The Norfolk Coast Path runs mostly parallel to the Coasthopper and Coastliner bus routes, so the moment I'd had enough, or he began to flag, we could bale out at a bus stop. But helped by perfect weather, no blisters, near-zero elevation and a full moon, we made it to the car in Sunny Hunny. By the time we got home, though, my legs were so stiff that I hobbled into the house like Quasimodo. The dog, on the other hand, trotted in completely recharged. Never underestimate the stamina of a Jack Russell.

THE DRONE

Last May the Japanese outdoor equipment brand Snow Peak staged a takeover event at Bert's Kitchen Garden campsite in Trefor, in Wales. One of the highlights was the opening ceremony, for which the chief executive had flown from Japan to make a speech. As he took to the stage and the organisers launched their drones, all hell broke loose. How could they have known that Dave hates kites, parachutes and drones? I hustled him out of the crowd, but it was too late: the speech was over. "No one heard a word," a Snow Peak employee sighed.

THE DALMATIANS

Lons le Saunier in the Jura, France, is home to the Vache Qui Rit factory, manufacturer of the cheese triangles. Dogs are banned and my hotel's receptionist, who had fallen for Dave, said that she would look after him. When I returned she was ashen – she had taken le Jacques Rousseau to the café next door and tied him to a table while she enjoyed un café. Dave took umbrage at a pair of passing dalmatians and charged, dragging the table like a wrecking ball. There had been some damage, she said, and some complaints – they cost me £200.

THE COWS

Having grown up on a farm, I am aware that cows and dogs do not get on. But because familiarity breeds contempt we found ourselves pursued by a herd along a footpath in Cornwall. Dave thought that barking at them would help. It didn't. I let him off his lead to improve his chances of escape, but he wouldn't leave my side. The Friesians were now close enough to touch, probing our defences. The gate was at least 150 yards away, so there was only one thing for it: I scooped Dave up and walked backwards to the gate, fending off the cattle like a desperado holding off a posse. For all the elephants and bears I've encountered, this was the narrowest escape.

THE LEAD

In 2024 I was walking back to the car from the Spar in Filey, North Yorkshire, with the lead of a certain Jack Russell and a bag of shopping in one hand and a 99 in the other. As I reached the beach car park and prepared to take my first lick, four things happened in very quick succession. First, a herring gull landed next to us. Second, the dog went for it. Third, the 99 went into my glasses rather than my mouth. And fourth, I realised the need for a patented, shock-absorbing dog lead. I haven't invented it yet, but I might. Keep an eye on *Dragons' Den*.

THE VETS

One consequence of Brexit has been the introduction of the Animal Health Certificate (AHC) for dogs, cats and ferrets travelling to Europe. Out of curiosity I asked vets near my home in Norfolk how much they would charge for a rabies booster and the AHC – they quoted between £475 and £575. My mistake in this case has been my failure to start a campaign to stop an unregulated industry charging whatever they can get away with to weigh an animal, scan its microchip, check for a rabies vaccination and fill in an online form. The gouging has to end, but not all vets are greedy: mine charges £175.

SOMETHING TO DECLARE

How to gamify your group trip for added holiday fun

HUW OLIVER

You think you know your friends, but then you go on holiday with them and, well … Nathan wants to lie in. Alex fancies sitting in a café reading. Christian has his eyes set on a museum on the other side of town. Hugo has inexplicably left the flat before 7am and no one knows where he is. It's only day one, and already everything has fallen to pieces.

Many of us go on group holidays — more than two thirds of those polled in a recent YouGov/British Airways survey said they planned to co-ordinate their travel with friends or extended family this year — but planning the minutiae via WhatsApp beforehand and the organisation in situ can be a nightmare. It's all the more difficult when everyone in your group works to different daily routines. One of you might be an early-rising fitness fanatic; another would ideally lounge in bed prior to an excursion to the nearest croissant shop. We all have different ideas as to what constitutes a good break — art exhibition or alfresco drink? Long walk or beach time? And sometimes it can cause serious tension.

My mates, certainly *not* those cited in the opening paragraph, are no exception. We may have similar interests — namely modernist architecture, dumpling-based cuisine and pints — but corralling five independent-minded men into the same holiday schedule is never going to be easy.

So on our most recent trip, a four-stop interrail-style train journey through central Europe, we did things differently. We had limited time — between one and three days — in four cities (Gdansk, Poznan and Wroclaw in Poland, and Prague in the Czech Republic). The planning of activities, food and drink at each stop was intimidating; we wanted to maximise our time but also, frankly, couldn't be bothered to research every single destination. Our solution? Take one city each and nail an itinerary, *à la* TV dinner-party-off *Come Dine with Me*, that would impress our pals.

The idea brought out the best in each of us. Friend 1 is a high-earning, experience-economy specialist, so he took us to the local Lechia Gdansk-Arka Gdynia football derby — an intense introduction to Polish footie culture. Friend 2 is a super-organised completist, so we explored every inch of Poznan and had our time slot for the Croissant Museum confirmed weeks in advance. As for Wroclaw, Friend 3 (me) put nearly all his faith in a single blog on the Oxford Drinker Camra website. It worked — hangovers for all.

On to the Czech Republic, and Friend 4 had visited Prague a few times so made the perfect host; we explored off-piste neighbourhoods, and were offered several options for every night out. Friend 5 was joint organiser and didn't appear to have put in much effort — until he introduced us to the edgy area of Holesovice and all was forgiven.

Initially it was hard to cede control of our schedules; we are all planners by heart. But the pros were clear: the entire time it felt like we had a personal guide, making our objectively hectic itinerary somehow (almost) relaxing. We didn't even bother doling out scores as they do on the TV programme. The whole trip was a ten out of ten.

What are your best tips for group trips? Let us know in the comments online

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JANUARY 2026

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Enjoy an incredible scenic cruise along the Åkrafjord past the mighty Langfoss Waterfall, where it's almost possible to feel the spray of this magnificent natural wonder. Widely regarded as one of Norway's best waterfalls the Langfoss is a truly unforgettable sight

Sun 25 **Olden, Norway** (depart early pm)
Cruising Nordfjord & Innvikfjorden

Mon 26 **Haugesund, Norway**

Tue 27 **Lerwick, Shetland Islands, Scotland** (depart late night) **★Up Helly Aa Festival★**
Capital of the Shetland Islands, Lerwick is a popular tourist destination, thanks to its stunning coastlines. What's more, you'll be in port in time for the annual Up Helly Aa festival - a fire festival steeped in ancient Norse traditions which promises to be an unforgettable experience

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Day 13	**Svolvær, Norway**
Day 14	**Bessaker, Norway** This is the Helgeland Coast, a well-known stretch full of distinctive mountains that have inspired many local myths
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Day 17	**Bergen, Norway** Transfer to the airport for your flight to London

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SCENIC SPLENDOUR

COMPLIMENTARY OCEANVIEW TO BALCONY UPGRADE

LIMITED AVAILABILITY

INCLUDES LAKE COMO WALKING TOUR

No-Fly Queen Anne Voyage, Venice Simplon-Orient-Express and Immersive Italian Lakes Escape

16 Nights

September 4, 2026

CUNARD

Your Holiday Includes

Full-Board Cruise

Eight-night full-board cruise on board Queen Anne

Visiting: Civitavecchia, La Spezia, Marseille, Málaga, Gibraltar, Southampton

Complimentary Oceanview to Balcony upgrade

Rail Journeys

Eurostar Plus train journey from London to Paris

Two-day all-inclusive luxury Venice Simplon-Orient-Express train journey from Paris to Verona

Dedicated steward service

Three-course lunch, four-course dinner and continental breakfast

Full porterage service included

Tour

Lake Como walking tour

Hotel Stays

Three-night four-star stay in Lake Maggiore at the Hotel Villa Paradiso

Two-night four-star stay in Lake Garda at the Aqualux Hotel Spa Suite and Bardolino

Two-night four-star stay in Florence at the Grand Hotel Adriatico

All hotel stays include breakfast

All Transfers

HOLIDAY CODE: EUR3244

INSIDE FROM **£7,499**PP	OCEANVIEW FROM **£8,999**PP
BALCONY FROM **£8,999**PP	GRILL SUITE FROM **£11,499**PP

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In partnership with Imagine Cruising

AEGEAN OPULENCE

COMPLIMENTARY BRAND-NEW FIVE-STAR ULTRA-LUXURY ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORT

SAVE UP TO £4,400 PER COUPLE^

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS

Ultra-Luxury All-Inclusive Silversea Greek Isles Voyage with Five-Star Ikos Crete Escape

13 Nights June - July, 2026

SILVERSEA

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

Seven-night all-inclusive ultra-luxury cruise on board *Silver Nova*

Visiting: Athens, Nafplion, Milos, Heraklion, Rhodes, Kuşadası, Mykonos, Athens

Includes one shore excursion per guest at every port

Pre-paid gratuities and Wi-Fi on board

In-suite butler service and fully stocked fridge for all suites

All-inclusive beverages including fine wines, beers and premium spirits

Complimentary Luxury Hotel Stays

Five-night five-star all-inclusive hotel stay in Crete at the Ikos Kissamos

Enhance your stay by upgrading to a Deluxe Room at the Ikos Kissamos

One-night five-star stay in Athens at the Divani Caravel Hotel with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

HOLIDAY CODE: EUR2268	
CLASSIC VERANDA SUITE FROM* **£5,699PP**	SUPERIOR VERANDA SUITE FROM* **£5,899PP**
DELUXE VERANDA SUITE FROM* **£6,199PP**	PREMIUM VERANDA SUITE FROM* **£6,699PP**

*Prices and itinerary shown are based on June 29, 2026 departure. ^Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing a Classic Veranda Suite, booking directly with Imagine Cruising.

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HISTORIC HORIZONS

INCLUDES ESCORTED TOUR OF IGUAZU FALLS AND MACHU PICCHU

INCLUDES FOUR DAY ANTARCTICA EXPERIENCE

INCLUDES PRINCESS PLUS® PACKAGE

All-Inclusive Princess South America Voyage with Iguazu Falls, Machu Picchu and Antarctic Experience

33 Nights January 16, 2027

PRINCESS®

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

17 night all-inclusive cruise on board Majestic Princess®

Visiting*: Buenos Aires (overnight in port), Punta Arenas, Ushuaia, Antarctic Peninsula (scenic cruising), Port Stanley, Montevideo, Buenos Aires

Princess Plus® Package including: MedallionNet® Max Wi-Fi, Crew appreciation, Plus Beverage Package and more

Escorted Tours

Tour of Christ the Redeemer, Walking tour of Iguazu Falls including both the Brazilian and Argentinian sides of the falls, Sacred Valley tour, Expedition train to Machu Picchu and Machu Picchu tour

Hotel Stays

Four-star stays in Rio de Janeiro and Iguazu

Five-star stays in Iguazu, Buenos Aires, Lima, Sacred Valley and Cusco

All hotel stays include breakfast

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

HOLIDAY CODE: AME8246

INTERIOR FROM	BALCONY FROM
£8,499PP	£9,499PP

MINI-SUITE FROM
£10,499PP

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CARIBBEAN BLISS

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS

INCLUDES THREE-NIGHT HOTEL STAY IN BARBADOS

INCLUDES PREMIUM DRINKS, WORLD-CLASS DINING AND WI-FI

Ultra-Luxury All-Inclusive Seabourn Caribbean Voyage and Barbados Escape

11 Nights

March 11, 2026

SEABOURN

Embark Seabourn Ovation for the ultimate Caribbean getaway, paired with three-nights at the Hilton Barbados Resort.

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

Seven-night all-inclusive ultra-luxury cruise on board Seabourn Ovation

Visiting: Barbados, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Barbados

Complimentary premium spirits and fine wines available on board

Complimentary caviar offered throughout your voyage

Complimentary world-class dining and culinary experiences that rival the finest restaurants anywhere

Tipping is neither required, nor expected

Welcome Champagne and complimentary in-suite bar stocked with your preferences

Complimentary Wi-Fi packages with unlimited minutes

Hotel Stay

Three-night four-star hotel stay in Barbados at the Hilton Barbados Resort with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flight

HOLIDAY CODE: AME8239

VERANDA SUITE (V1) FROM **Sold Out**	VERANDA SUITE (V2) FROM **£4,599PP**
VERANDA SUITE (V3) FROM **£4,899PP**	VERANDA SUITE (V4) FROM **£5,199PP**

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FESTIVE SUNSHINE

ALL-INCLUSIVE HOTEL STAY IN THE MALDIVES OVER CHRISTMAS

COMPLIMENTARY CLASSIC DRINKS PACKAGE AND WI-FI

INCLUDES FIVE-STAR ALL-INCLUSIVE HOTEL STAY IN BALI

All-Inclusive Maldives Christmas, Bali Escape and Immersive Celebrity Asia Voyage

25 Nights   December 3, 2026

Celebrity X Cruises®

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

12 night all-inclusive cruise on board Celebrity Millennium®

Visiting: Bali (overnight in port), Celukan Bawang, Kuala Lumpur (overnight in port), Penang, Langkawi, Phuket (overnight in port), Singapore

Complimentary Classic Drinks Package and Wi-Fi upgrade

Hotel Stays

Five-night five-star all-inclusive stay in Bali at the Nusa Dua Beach Hotel and Spa – Handwritten Collection

One-night four-star hotel stay in Singapore at The Robertson House by The Crest Collection with breakfast

Five-night four-star all-inclusive hotel stay in the Maldives at the Sun Siyam Olhuveli

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

HOLIDAY CODE: ASA8558

INSIDE FROM £5,999PP	OCEAN VIEW FROM £6,499PP
VERANDA FROM £7,299PP	CONCIERGE CLASS FROM £7,999PP

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FIERCE CASCADES

SALE!

27 NIGHTS

FROM AN INCREDIBLE

£6,999pp^

SAVE UP TO £2,800 PER COUPLE*

OFFER EXTENDED - SEPT 12, 2025

COMPLIMENTARY FIVE-STAR HOTEL STAY IN THE SEYCHELLES

INCLUDES ESCORTED TOUR OF VICTORIA FALLS

All-Inclusive Azamara Africa Voyage, Luxury Seychelles Escape and Victoria Falls Discovery

27 Nights April 20, 2026

AZAMARA CRUISES

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

17 night all-inclusive cruise on board Azamara Onward

Visiting: Seychelles, Mombasa (overnight in port), Zanzibar, Mamoudzou, Nosy Be, Richards Bay, Durban, Cape Town (overnight in port)

Pre-paid gratuities and complimentary AzAmazing Evening® event

Concierge services for personal guidance and reservations

Hotel Stays

Complimentary three-night five-star hotel stay in the Seychelles at the Story Seychelles

Two-night five-star hotel stay in Cape Town at The Westin Cape Town

Three-night four-star stay in Victoria Falls at The Palm River Hotel

All hotel stays include breakfast

Escorted Tours

Walking tour of Victoria Falls

Zambezi River cruise

Bushtracks Express

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

CRUISE CODE: AFR7373

CLUB INTERIOR FROM	CLUB OCEANVIEW FROM	CLUB VERANDA FROM
£6,799PP	£7,499PP	£8,479PP

*Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing a Club Veranda cabin, booking directly with Imagine Cruising.

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AUTUMN SPLENDOUR

INCLUDES TWO-NIGHT HOTEL STAY IN SEOUL

COMPLIMENTARY ESCORTED TOUR OF MOUNT FUJI

INCLUDES CLASSIC DRINKS PACKAGE AND WI-FI

All-Inclusive Asia Voyage, South Korea Discovery and Mount Fuji in Cosmos Bloom

18 Nights   Sept - Oct, 2026

Celebrity Cruises®

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

12 night all-inclusive cruise on board Celebrity Millennium®

Visiting*: Seoul, Jeju Island, Kumamoto, Kagoshima, Hiroshima, Kyoto (overnight in port), Shimizu, Tokyo (overnight in port)

Includes Classic Drinks Package and Wi-Fi

Hotel Stays

Two-night five-star stay in Seoul at the Novotel Ambassador Seoul Dongdaemun Hotels and Residences with breakfast

Two-night four-star hotel stay in Tokyo at the Grand Nikko Tokyo Daiba

Complimentary Escorted Tours

Reserved seat on the bullet train, Mount Fuji Visitor Centre for History and Photography, views over Lake Kawaguchi with Mount Fuji, and views over Oishi Park with Mount Fuji

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

HOLIDAY CODE: ASA8543

INSIDE FROM*	OCEAN VIEW FROM*
£4,299PP	£4,799PP
VERANDA FROM*	CONCIERGE CLASS FROM*
£5,499PP	£6,299PP

*Prices and itinerary shown are based on October 2, 2026 departure.

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OTTOMAN ODYSSEY

SAVE UP TO £1,800 PER COUPLE*

JOURNEY THROUGH FLORENCE, SIENA AND PISA – ICONS OF ITALIAN CULTURE

UNWIND IN MONTECATINI'S ROMAN SPA TOWN AND HEALING HOT SPRINGS

Grand Tour of Ancient Türkiye with Cappadocia and Luxury Mediterranean Cunard Voyage

18 Nights April - September, 2026 **CUNARD**

Your Holiday Includes

Full-Board Cruise

Seven-night full-board cruise on board Queen Victoria

Visiting+: İstanbul, Dardanelles Strait (scenic cruising), Athens, Mykonos, Katakolon, Messina Strait (scenic cruising), Barcelona

Hotel Stays

Four-star hotel stays in İstanbul, Ankara, Cappadocia, Konya, Pamukkale, Kuşadası and Çanakkale

All hotel stays include breakfast^

Escorted Tours

İstanbul city tour, Hagia Sophia, Grand Bazaar, salt lake photo stop, Cappadocia tour, Sultan Han Caravanserai visit, Konya tour, Cotton Castle, thermal baths, Ephesus visit, Ancient City of Pergamon tour with cable car to the Acropolis of Pergamon, Troy ancient city and Trojan Horse photo stop, Gallipoli Memorial, Anzac Cove and the Lone Pine Cemetery visit and more

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

HOLIDAY CODE: EUR2226

INSIDE FROM+ **£3,299PP**	OCEANVIEW FROM+ **£3,789PP**
BALCONY FROM+ **£4,299PP**	GRILL SUITE FROM+ **£5,419PP**

^Konya and Pamukkale hotel stays includes breakfast and dinner. +Prices and itinerary shown are based on April 30, 2026 departure. Grill Suite price is based on September 17, 2026 departure.

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ADRENALINE-FUELLED THRILLS

UNPARALLELED PIT LANE VIEWS AT MONACO GRAND PRIX™ RACE DAY

YOUR BOUTIQUE HOTEL AT SEA: ENJOY INTIMATE CRUISING

Monaco Grand Prix™ with All-Inclusive Azamara Voyage and Gran Canaria Escape

16 Nights

May 26, 2026

AZAMARA CRUISES

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

14 night all-inclusive cruise on board Azamara Onward

Visiting: Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, Agadir, Casablanca, Gibraltar, Málaga, Almería, Marseille, Saint-Tropez, Villefranche-sur-Mer and Monaco Grand Prix™ Race Day, Livorno, Civitavecchia, Barcelona

Complimentary alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages including house spirits, wine and international beers

Pre-paid gratuities and complimentary AzAmazing Evening event

Concierge services for personal guidance and reservations

Event

Grandstand T Ticket to Race Day at the Monaco Grand Prix™ including views of the pit lane

Sunday, June 7, 2026 (Race Day)

Hotel Stay

Two-night four-star stay in Gran Canaria at the AC Hotel Gran Canaria by Marriott with breakfast

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

HOLIDAY CODE: GPX7277

CLUB INTERIOR FROM **£4,499PP**	CLUB OCEANVIEW FROM **£4,999PP**
CLUB VERANDA FROM **£5,999PP**	CLUB VERANDA PLUS FROM **£8,499PP**

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EXCLUSIVE OFFER

16 NIGHTS
FROM AN INCREDIBLE
£1,399pp+

SAVE UP TO £1,760
PER COUPLE*

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COMPLIMENTARY OCEANVIEW TO VERANDAH UPGRADE

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS AND HOTEL STAY IN MIAMI

Charms of the Caribbean and Miami Escape

16 Nights

Nov, 2025 - Mar, 2026

Holland America Line
SAVOR THE JOURNEY

Your Holiday Includes

Full-Board Cruise

14 night full-board cruise on board Nieuw Statendam

Visiting+: Fort Lauderdale, Half Moon Cay, Ocho Rios, George Town, Cozumel, Fort Lauderdale, Half Moon Cay, Grand Turk, Amber Cove, Key West, Fort Lauderdale

Complimentary Hotel Stay

One-night four-star stay in Miami

Complimentary Flights

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flight

HOLIDAY CODE: AME8242

INSIDE FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	OBSTRUCTED VERANDAH FROM	SUITE FROM
£1,399PP+	£1,699PP+	£1,699PP+	£2,699PP+

+Prices and itinerary shown are based on November 28, 2025 departure. *Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing, booking directly with Imagine Cruising.

View this holiday online by scanning the QR code or search the code on our website.

BOOK AN OCEANVIEW OR ABOVE TO RECEIVE AN ALL-INCLUSIVE UPGRADE

INCLUDES 13-NIGHT TOUR OF JAPAN BY RAIL AND MOUNT FUJI TOUR

Japanese Alps Rail Journey, Mount Fuji and Princess Voyage

26 Nights

February 20, 2026

PRINCESS

Your Holiday Includes

Full-Board Cruise

11 night full-board cruise on board Diamond Princess®

Visiting: Tokyo, Hiroshima, Kanmon Strait (scenic cruising), Shimonoseki, Busan, Nagasaki, Kagoshima, Kōchi, Kobe, Shimizu, Tokyo

Book an Oceanview or above to receive Princess Plus® worth £1,100 per couple including:
Plus Beverage Package*, Unlimited Wi-Fi, Gratuities included

Hotel Stays

Four-star hotel stays in Osaka, Hiroshima, Kyoto, Kanazawa, Takayama, Shizuoka and Tokyo

All hotel stays include breakfast

Rail Journeys^

Bullet Trains from Osaka to Hiroshima, Hiroshima to Kyoto and Nagoya to Shizuoka

Sagano Romantic Train Journey, Kyoto to Kanazawa Thunderbird Train and Southern Alps Abt Scenic Steam Train

Escorted Tours

Tours include Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, Kyoto, Takayama, Tokyo and more

All Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

HOLIDAY CODE: ASA8534

INTERIOR FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	MINI-SUITE FROM
£5,999PP	£6,999PP	£7,999PP	£9,199PP

*Enjoy all-inclusive drinks, unlimited Wi-Fi and crew appreciation. Must be applied to your booking 7 days prior to the sailing date. The Plus Beverage Package includes cocktails, wine, beer, spirits, fountain soda, specialty coffees, bottled water, teas and other individual beverages up to $15 USD each. ^Luggage transfer provided when travelling on Bullet Train to hotel.

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EXCLUSIVE OFFER

36 NIGHTS
FROM AN INCREDIBLE
£3,499pp

View this holiday online by scanning the QR code or search the code on our website.

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHT

SAVE UP TO £1,200 PER COUPLE*

A Grand Cunard Voyage from Singapore to Southampton with City Escape

36 Nights   March 25, 2026

CUNARD

Your Holiday Includes

Full-Board Cruise

33 night full-board cruise on board Queen Mary 2

Visiting: Singapore, Port Klang, Port Louis, Durban, Cape Town (overnight in port), Walvis Bay, Dakar, Tenerife, Cádiz, Southampton

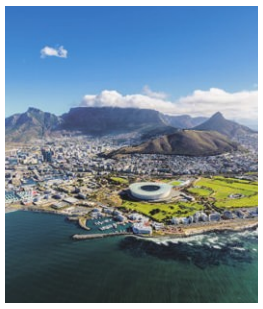
Complimentary Hotel Stay

Two-night four-star hotel stay in Singapore at the Parkroyal on Beach Road, Singapore with breakfast

Complimentary Flight and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flight



HOLIDAY CODE: REP7445

INSIDE FROM	OCEANVIEW FROM	BALCONY FROM	GRILL SUITE FROM
£3,499PP	£3,999PP	£4,999PP	Sold Out

*Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing a Balcony, booking directly with Imagine Cruising.

View this holiday online by scanning the QR code or search the code on our website.

COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHTS

COMPLIMENTARY HOTEL STAY IN SYDNEY

All-Inclusive Azamara Australia, Papua New Guinea and Far-East Asia Voyage with Sydney Escape

AZAMARA CRUISES

26 Nights   February 27, 2026

Your Holiday Includes

All-Inclusive Cruise

21 night all-inclusive cruise on board Azamara Onward

Visiting: Sydney (overnight in port), Mooloolaba, Airlie Beach, Cairns (overnight in port), Alotau, Madang, Koror, Manila (overnight in port), Hong Kong

Complimentary alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages including house spirits, wine and international beers

Complimentary Hotel Stay

Two-night four-star hotel stay in Sydney at the Rydges World Square with breakfast

Complimentary Flights and Transfers

London departure – regional flights available

Overnight flights

HOLIDAY CODE: ASA8557

CLUB INTERIOR FROM	CLUB OCEANVIEW FROM	CLUB VERANDA FROM	CLUB CONTINENT SUITE FROM
£4,299PP	£4,499PP	£5,499PP	£11,599PP

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SALE!

15 NIGHTS
FROM AN INCREDIBLE
£2,699pp^

SAVE UP TO £2,800
PER COUPLE*

OFFER EXTENDED - SEPT 12, 2025

MEKONG MARVELS

INCLUDES ESCORTED TOURS OF ANGKOR WAT AND THE CỦ CHI TUNNELS

EXCLUSIVE TO IMAGINE CRUISING

All-Inclusive Luxury Mekong River Cruise with Vietnam and Cambodia Tour

15 Nights Nov, 2025 - Apr, 2026

LOTUS CRUISES

Delve into southeast Asia's multi-faceted wonders with discovery tours, a Mekong River cruise, and a sumptuous beachfront haven stay.

Your adventure begins in Vietnam's Phan Thiết with a five-star beach escape before you board the all-inclusive Mekong Navigator and set sail for the ancient temples of Cambodia.

Your Holiday Includes

Luxury Hotel Stays

Three-night five-star hotel stay in Phan Thiết at the Anantara Mui Ne Resort

Two-night five-star stay in Ho Chi Minh City at the New World Saigon Hotel

Two-night five-star hotel stay in Siem Reap at the Borei Angkor Resort and Spa

All hotel stays include breakfast

All-Inclusive River Cruise

Seven-night all-inclusive river cruise on board Mekong Navigator

Visiting^: Mỹ Tho, Sa Đéc, Mỹ An Hưng, Phnom Penh (overnight in port), Opopel Village, Siem Reap

Escorted Tours

Củ Chi Tunnels and Angkor Wat

All Flights and Transfers

London departure

Overnight flight

HOLIDAY CODE: ASA2229

SUPERIOR SUITE FROM^ **£2,699PP**	VISTA SUITE FROM^ **Sold Out**
SIGNATURE SUITE FROM^ **£2,999PP**	PRESTIGE SUITE FROM^ **£3,799PP**

*Prices shown include discount and savings based on two passengers sharing an Signature Suite, booking directly with Imagine Cruising. ^Prices and itinerary shown are based on December 3, 2025 departure. Prestige Suite price is based on November 29, 2025 departure.

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